

Sermon text: Mark 1:4–11
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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I'm not afraid to admit that one of my least favorite activities is an ice-breaker. If you've ever been in a setting where there's a lot of people you don't know, like at the beginning of a school year or at a big work conference or workshop, you might have participated in an ice-breaker activity. You think you're showing up for a regular meeting or orientation, and all of a sudden you're told to lip-sync your favorite song from the 90s. The goal of an ice-breaker, apparently, is to create a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere. This often happens in an uncomfortable and unrelaxed way. In most ice-breakers, though, you might learn simple information about the people around you, like their name and their most basic likes and dislikes. Usually, whoever's in charge wants to facilitate "relationship building" with the people you'll be spending most of your time with.

In the season of Epiphany, we're getting to know Jesus more and more. Jesus reveals himself and his glory to us in order to build a relationship with us. Unfortunately, not everyone whom Jesus came to save knows who Jesus is or they don't care that he's here at all. In our Gospel from Mark this morning, Jesus came to be baptized by John and in doing so he started to reveal himself more to the human race. As Mark records this brief but important event, we're **getting to know Jesus**, and we'll learn more about (first) **who he is**, and (secondly) **what he does**.

Our sermon text comes from the first chapter of Mark's Gospel. This is how Mark chose to start his gospel about Jesus: by telling us that Jesus came to be baptized by John in the Jordan River. That's a good place to start, because in this story we can start to learn about who Jesus really is.

First, we meet another guy in the wilderness, who dressed funny and who ate strange things—his name was John the Baptist. He didn't look like anything too impressive, just a voice calling in the wilderness, like Isaiah had prophesied. John was not the main attraction, but he was a voice who announced something spectacular: **"After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie."** So here's the first of three things we're going to learn about Jesus in this story: he'd be more powerful than your average preacher. Jesus would be a powerful preacher whose actions and life would ultimately do the work needed to make our baptism valid.

Not to say that John's baptizing wasn't as effective – the baptism that John performed was very valid. It was **"a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."** This was the "preparatory work" to pave the way. In Advent we talked a lot about how John was preparing the hearts of the people for Jesus, the "more powerful" one. The people needed to be aware of their sins and be truly sorry for them: so, **"confessing their sins, they were baptized by [John] in the Jordan River."**

Then one day, Jesus came from Nazareth to be baptized by John too. Mark records the baptism of Jesus in just three short verses, but we still see how momentous this event was. Immediately after Jesus was baptized, he saw **"the Spirit descending on him like a dove."** So here's the second of three things we learn about Jesus in this story: with the descent of the Spirit, we have clear evidence that Jesus is the Servant of the Lord spoken of in the prophets, who would be anointed with the Spirit. In Isaiah the Messiah had prophesied: **"The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor."** And here he is, Jesus, anointed by the Spirit and on his way to

preach good news. God also said through Isaiah, **“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations.”** And here he is, Jesus: God put his Spirit on him and we know that he was here to bring justice to the nations.

So the first thing we learn about Jesus: he’s powerful. Second: he’s the Servant of the Lord. And finally, we learn one more thing through the voice of God himself coming down from heaven: **“You are my Son, whom I love.”** Here is undeniable evidence of who Jesus is: God’s own Son. The Father himself said it. In fact we have all three persons of the Trinity present here, giving us all the evidence we need. The Father spoke from heaven, the Son stood on the bank of the Jordan, and was anointed with the Holy Spirit. Who is Jesus? He is the long-awaited Messiah. As we sang in the opening hymn, **True Son of God and Mary’s Son.**

Have you ever seen someone famous? Maybe you’ve been lucky enough to have a chance to actually talk to a famous person. But say you just saw someone famous from a distance, like at a concert—a famous musician, or at a sports game—a famous athlete. At a concert, no one questions whether the guy singing on stage is actually the guy they paid to see, rather than some imposter – because they can tell from his voice. If you went to an Ohio State football game, no one questions whether the guy in the quarterback spot wearing the #1 jersey is actually Justin Fields, and not a look-alike: because you can tell by the way he plays.

So here Jesus was, who came on the scene after being announced by John, and the almighty Father calls down from heaven and says, **“This is my Son.”** Between that testimony and all the prophecies Jesus fulfilled, it couldn’t be more clear-cut. And yet not everyone believed it. Though they come face to face with God’s Son, some named him an imposter.

Even if we don’t openly deny that Jesus is God’s Son, we might be guilty of the same thing when we doubt that his death on the cross paid for even *that* sin too, or when we doubt that Jesus walks with us through all our problems today. When even a small inner voice doubts that Jesus is who he says he is, we’re guilty of not recognizing him.

This is why John calls us to a baptism of repentance. He calls us to confess our sins, to bring them before God and ask him to help us turn away from those sins. **“Repentance”** is to look back on all the sins we can’t do anything about ourselves, and to ask God to take them away for us, for Jesus’ sake. And then we believe that in our baptism, just like the one John gave, we have the real forgiveness of sins. So **who is Jesus?** He is God’s Son who provides that forgiveness.

Now let’s learn from Mark what Jesus does.

John said, **“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”** We know that after Jesus was raised from the dead, he sent the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Jesus himself told his disciples on the night before he died, **“[The Holy Spirit] will guide you into all truth.”** Jesus gives an advocate. He gives a helper to those who follow him. But first, before that happened, he came to be baptized by John.

What does Jesus do? **“He came from Nazareth” (to the Jordan).** He came willingly, not because he was told to by Mary and Joseph. Not because his Father in heaven forced him to, but because he wanted to. And he was baptized by John. In Matthew’s account of the baptism, we know that John actually objected to this at first, saying, **“Lord, I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”** So why was he baptized? Jesus said, it was **“to fulfill all righteousness.”** This was Jesus’ inauguration into his

ministry on earth. This is again Jesus becoming one with us. As he came from heaven, now he comes to us in the waters of the Jordan.

On the surface, his baptism sounded just like everyone else who came to be baptized. But it wasn't all the same. He had no sins to confess, no transgressions to be washed away, no rebellion to repent of. He came to be baptized like a sinner, but he himself had no sin. But here he was anyway, joining himself to the sins of everyone else. When everyone else brought to their baptism their selfishness and their lust and their arguments with their parents or laziness at work, when they bring the filthy grime of all of their sins, Jesus came to his baptism so that he could pick up all our sins and carry them to the cross.

You might say that Jesus' baptism was his official installation for his work as our Prophet, Priest, and King. And look at the stamp of approval he gets from his Father: **"With you I am well pleased."** He says, "I am well pleased that you are carrying out my mission. You are carrying out my plan of salvation that I put in place at the creation of the world."

Do you know what it feels like to look for a stamp of approval? I think we probably all do. One example is when you're applying for a job. As you strive for the "stamp of approval," to be hired, you might face an obstacle as a personal shortcoming gets in the way of your being qualified for that job. Another example is when you want approval in a relationship. You might face an obstacle if your past failures or offenses that get in the way of a good, comfortable relationship with someone. Most significantly, you look for a stamp of approval in your relationship with God. But as you do, your sins and your guilty conscience tell you you'll never be approved in his sight because of that certain commandment you know you break day after day, or that slip-up from years ago that you still see the consequences of, and all the other things you're ashamed to know have happened in the sight of God.

When the devil holds these things in front of your face, and says "you've messed up," you can hold up your baptism in response and say, "No, Satan, your claims are not valid, because I am baptized into Christ. And since I've been baptized into Christ, I've been clothed with Christ and his clean clothes cover over my sins so that God doesn't see them anymore." Jesus removes every obstacle that stands in the way of your stamp of approval from God.

In fact, he opens heaven for us. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all recorded in their Gospels that at Jesus' baptism, the heavens were opened. But Mark is the only one that described the heavens as being torn or split open. He described it as a schism. Which is interesting, because at the very end of his Gospel, he used that same word again; when Jesus gave up his last breath on the cross, Mark said **"The curtain of the temple was torn (or schismed) in two from top to bottom."** The curtain in the temple had separated the people from God's presence in the Most Holy Place. So the tearing of that curtain signified that by Jesus' death, he granted people access to God. The way to heaven was opened by what Jesus did. So like two bookends on either side of Mark's Gospel, like two bookends on either end of Jesus' ministry, the schism both at Jesus' baptism and at his death reminds us that Jesus has opened the way to heaven for you and me. He's opened the way for us to get to know him and have a good relationship with God.

In Jesus' baptism, he came to the Jordan. In your baptism, he comes to you. Because God is well pleased with Jesus, God is well pleased with us. We get the "stamp of approval" because of what Jesus does. What does Jesus do? Jesus gives us the right to come to the baptismal font. He makes it possible for God to write his name on us and claim us as his own. When you remember your baptism, you can confidently

say to yourself, “I am God’s child, and he is well pleased with me .” That’s **what Jesus does** – he presents us to God as children and heirs, fully righteous and forgiven.

Even though I always breathed a sigh of relief after the “fun” ice-breaker portion of an event was over, it was good and beneficial to start to get to know the other people there. Whether I was meeting new classmates or new coworkers for the first time, it was important to know some things about the people whom I was going to spend most of my time with.

The most important person to get to know better is Jesus. The most important person to spend time with is Jesus. The reason he came to earth and the reason he went to the Jordan to be baptized and to Calvary to be crucified is so that he could mend the relationship between God and man. And he still comes to us in the Word and in the Sacrament—both in your baptism and every time you receive Holy Communion—he comes with the news of sins forgiven and brings the blessing of an increase of faith. Faith in the one who at his baptism was anointed to carry out the perfect ministry of Prophet, Priest, and King. As prophet, he revealed God’s truth. As priest, he atoned for your sins. And as King, he won the victory for you. That’s who Jesus is, and that’s what he does for you. Amen.

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.