

And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:4-11)

Hidden Glory in the Water

"I'm not hurting anyone else." He tells himself as he reaches for another drink that he doesn't need.

"No one will find out. We just have to be careful. It's just between us," they assure each other as they turn off the lights and crawl into sin with each other.

"I'll do better next time," she explains to the teacher after not having her work done again.

"I'm just so tired and wore out from everything," he defends himself after losing his temper.

"I don't see why it should be that big of a deal as long as I am happy. Why can't you support my decisions and accept me for who I am?" the fed up young adult asks mom and dad.

"I had no other choice...it's not like I do it all the time...at least I make sure to do..."

You've heard it. You heard yourself say it. We hear the world and find it creeping into how we talk or when someone comes confessing something to us: "I understand...it's really not that bad; you need to stop beating yourself up...at least it's not like _____...no one's perfect, etc." We are experts at hiding our sins. We close the doors, turn out the lights, shroud it with excuses and direct attention elsewhere to, at the very least, make ourselves feel better about how we live, act, and treat other people. We hope maybe we can hide a little bit how we go against God's will for us.

John heard all that in his day too. That's what makes his preaching so provocative and radical. He's not like the religions leaders of his day. Instead of dressing to impress, he wears clothes made of camel's hair. He's not in the synagogues, streets, or temple courts. He lives down by the river eating locusts and wild honey.

That all in itself would pique some curious minds. But that's not what pulls in all these people from the city and countryside. It's what this guy is saying. Their teachers (who sound very similar to what you hear today) had been telling them the cure for their aching consciences and guilt-ridden minds was by doing the Law better. Follow the rules. Make more rules and laws to make sure you are doing it right. And when you don't, cover it all in the blood of the sacrifices. Hide it under your connections as a Jew being in the line of God's chosen man Abraham. These religious leaders present a God who could be duped and easily fooled. He's a God who could be bargained with and maybe owes you after you did good enough things. He's a God who would love and accept you as long you meant well. That God sounds nice. That one makes sense. That type of God allows you to bury your conscience and file God's Law down to the sharpness of a butter knife. Hide it all you want, dull it down as much as possible, distract and divert the truth, the law still stands. You still have not done anything about the sins themselves. Your conscience still pricks.

Then there's John the Baptizer. Sent by God he preaches a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Remember the great divide after your spouse found out what you had been hiding from them? Remember how that close friend stopped speaking to you because of how you betrayed their trust? Remember how frustrating it is when someone always has an excuse and refuses to admit their wrong? That's you and your sin with God. Hide it all you want. God still sees. Close the doors as tightly as you can. God still gets in. Lie to yourself until you believe it. God knows the truth. God's love doesn't excuse, ignore, or accept the failures. He can't. He's holy. He's just—those sins have to be taken care of. So, he's not a God who accepts. He's a God who forgives. He's not a God who ignores the stain knowing very well the more you try to look away you can't. He's a God who bleaches the stain away. He's not satisfied with the status quo and the way you are. The call is for change of heart and mind—repentance. And God does the work within you. So the people come. Some inevitably came with the wrong motivation and personal agendas. But many came no longer trying to hide them but confess their sins trusting God will do as he says. And they are baptized by John in the Jordan River through which God gives the forgiveness of sins.

You did too. Do you realize what you did today? You said, "I am by nature sinful...I have done what is evil and failed to do what is good...I deserve your punishment both now and truly sorry for my sin." Hear how provocative that is? No excuses. No hiding. No sugar-coating or denying. "I am a sinner," is what I said. What you confessed. And that's what you are. Not just sinful actions; but a person full of sin whose only hope is the Lord's mercy and solution. That's who John promises, "**After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.**" Not a cover up; a solution.

Then John sees him. It had been another day filled with locusts, honey, baptizing and preaching. From far away he couldn't quite tell who it was. Like so many before him the man carefully picks his way down the rocky slope of the Judean countryside careful to not slip. As he gets closer, John may have wondered, "Is that who I think it is? What was he doing here from way up north in Nazareth? He's not here to be baptized, is he? This was for forgiving sinners. This was to wash sins away. Why would Jesus need something like this?"

Because that's what you and I need—to be washed, to be made clean, to have sins forgiven. And so Jesus lets God be God. He does not ignore sin or preach acceptance of trying your best. Jesus stands in the place of God's judgment for you. Jesus walks the same steps so many other sinners had taken. He stands in the water where sinners stood. And John baptizes him in the Jordan as he had baptized a country-side and city's worth of sinners. Because, as we hear in John's preaching, this was God's will: for flesh-and-blood humans to be baptized. And so here is Jesus—in the flesh-and-blood—doing his Father's will. Anyone else who may have seen this baptism it wouldn't have looked like much. It's just another person like so many others being baptized by John.

But then Jesus comes up out of the water. The sky is ripped open. What looks like a dove is the Spirit of God descending on Jesus anointing him with power to carry out the work that God had sent him to do. With that dove setting upon him John knows who this is: "This the one who had been promised. This is the one who is stronger and greater than I. This is the one who will pour out and baptize with the same Spirit. This is the Lamb of God who will take away the sins of the world."

Then a bodiless voice speaks from the heavens, "**You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.**" Who is this dripping with water from baptism? God's Son. Then, whose voice is this speaking? God the Father. He has a special relationship with this man walking out of the river—it's his beloved Son, Jesus who the Father assures, "With you I am well pleased."

Think about how that would encourage Jesus when the inevitable temptations of doubt would attack him in his work. Imagine the assurance this gives Jesus confronts his disciples for the same sin again. Imagine how that would fortify his resolve, in the flesh, as he faces the cross and asks his Father's will to be done. When he's hanging on that cross having claimed your sin to be his own, Jesus knows his Father is pleased with him. When people mock him, "If you are the Son of God, come down..." Jesus knows he doesn't need to prove a thing. He has his Father's promise. When the Father abandons him and he cries out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus knows his Father's attitude towards him still has not changed. He is still God's Son with whom the Father is pleased. So when his suffering for sin is finished, Jesus commits his spirit to his Father's hands knowing that three days later he will be raised to life again. So Jesus walks out of

that water, anointed with Spirit, sealed with the Father's promise, to go and do the work the Father set out for him to do.

It sure doesn't look like much is going on there. But there is the glory hidden in the water. Just as Jesus' baptism was not an empty ceremony but he actually receives the Spirit and God's promise, so you can be assured yours was not either. You actually receive what God says. Just as Jesus' baptism wasn't done to make God happy, so your baptism isn't done because we have to keep God happy with us. We baptize because God's will is to wash your sins away and make you a new creation.

It didn't look all that glorious as mom and dad bring the crying baby to the baptismal font dressed in the much-too-large white gown. Nervously in front of the congregation they stand watching the sign of the cross go over the head and heart of their child because Jesus had this little one in mind when he stood in the Jordan River. It was for this little one that he went to the cross. It was for this little one that he sheds his blood to redeem and buy back from sin. So the child receives the sign of the cross marking them a redeemed child of God. Then the pastor takes some water and pours it over their child's head and says, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." That's it. It's done. It doesn't look like much. You don't see the heavens being ripped open. But, the angels are praising God that another soul has been snatched from the grips of Satan. We don't see a dove descending, but the Spirit descends through water anointing this child. You don't hear the Father thundering from the heavens, but from his throne he declares, "This is my child, whom I love, with whom I am well-pleased."

Satan can scream all he want with his lies and accusations. But this baptized child already died to sin with Jesus on the cross and has been raised again. She is a new creation. Those sins are not counted against her. When the Father looks at her he only sees Jesus' righteousness and perfection, his daughter. Oh, she will struggle with sin her entire life. But it's a good struggle. She knows it doesn't give her a license to do whatever she wants because that's not her Father's will. And yet, she falls into sin again. But there is Jesus who assures her that when we confess our sins he is faithful and just. For Jesus' sake who was baptized just like you, who lived and died in your place, who rose again to give you life with him: he has washed your sins away and purifies you from all unrighteousness. And he's ready to forgive her again. When questions of worthiness pile up and sins of the past and present pop up, she relies on the Father's promise: you are God's baptized child whom he loves. He has not ignored your sins so they might come back. Jesus has washed them completely away. The stain is gone. She need not try and hide them any longer. She relies on God's promises. She confesses her sins and the Father forgives her because Jesus was baptized. That all started there in those baptismal waters. It didn't look like much. It didn't look like much at the Jordan River either. But there's hidden glory in the water. Amen.