

## Advent 2 / December 6, 2020

### Mark 1:8

**“I have baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”**

Moses begins the account of creation saying, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Mark begins his gospel in the same manner, writing, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” The gospel of Jesus Christ marks a new beginning, in which God will create a new heaven and a new earth, “in which righteousness dwells.” The gospel of Jesus is a new beginning, in which God recreates the human spirit, cleansing it of sin and making it a dwelling place for His Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes to us through the gospel of Jesus. In the letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul asks, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?” God dwells within believers through His Spirit, given by Jesus.

God’s righteous reign breaks into the world in the person of Jesus. In Jesus, God has begun to create a new heaven and a new earth as the home of righteousness through the sacrifice of His cross, by which He paid the debt of human sin. God’s righteous reign breaks into the human heart through the gospel of Jesus as men, children and women see and receive their Saviour. God reigns in the hearts of believers through the Holy Spirit, given by Jesus through baptism into His death and resurrection. The Holy Spirit continuously cleanses us of sin by washing us in the forgiveness of Jesus’ baptism. John baptized with water as a sign of repentance and forgiveness. Jesus baptizes us with the Holy Spirit through whom we receive the forgiveness of sin, the renewal of our spirits and the promise of life in a renewed creation, in which righteousness dwells.

Ritual washings were an important part of the religious practice of faithful Jews in the Old Testament period, up to and including the time of Jesus. Jesus healed a paralyzed man at a pool near the sheep gate in Jerusalem. It wasn’t a swimming pool. Worshippers used it to give themselves a ritual washing before entering the temple. Ritual washings were a reminder of sin, of the sacredness of the temple and of the forgiveness God provided through the sacrifices offered in the temple. Jesus’ arch opponents the Pharisees, ritually washed just about everything including their pots, pans and tables. When John appeared in the wilderness “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,” he was acting in accordance with the religious practices of the day, at least in appearance. For while the ritual washings of the Pharisees and temple worshipers revealed sin, these baptisms did not remove sin. However, Mark specifically says that John’s baptism was “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” John’s baptism was ordained by God for repentance, forgiveness and to prepare people to receive Jesus, in whom forgiveness is made full and given freely.

John was the messenger of the covenant, foretold by the prophet Malachi. He was the voice calling out in the wilderness, spoken of by Isaiah. He made people ready to receive their Lord, by calling them to repentance for the forgiveness of their sin. He was also Jesus’ cousin according to his humanity. Although they were kin, John recognized that Jesus was his Lord, according to His divinity. When Mary pregnant by the Holy Spirit, came to visit his mother, he acknowledged Jesus’ Lordship by leaping within her womb. John was a great prophet, but he confessed that of himself, he was not sufficient to perform the most menial task of a servant and untie the strap of Jesus’ sandals.

John confessed his unworthiness in comparison to Jesus, but nevertheless, he had a very important role to play in God’s plan of salvation. When he was born, his father Zechariah said he would make the people ready to receive their Lord. After his death, Jesus said that no prophet had arisen who was greater than John. He was the last great expression of Old Testament prophecy and of the covenant God made with Israel through Moses. John was the bridge between the Old and New Testaments; between the covenant God made with Israel through Moses and the covenant God made new and extends to all people through Jesus. John was a servant of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He prepared people to receive Jesus as their Saviour, by showing them their sinfulness and calling them to confess their sin. John represents the law, through which the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, so that in the gospel of Jesus, we would see our Saviour and in Him, receive forgiveness full and free and peace with God in time and for eternity.

Ritual washings, also known as baptisms, were an important part of the piety of religious Jews in the first century. They were similar to Christian baptism in appearance, but different in substance and the effect they had on the human soul. They were human actions by which people expressed faith in God. However, in Jesus’ baptism, God pours His grace into our hearts, gives us the Holy Spirit, faith, forgiveness and eternal life. In the New Testament, baptism is the sacrament of initiation by which we are joined to the death and resurrection of Christ and formally brought into fellowship with the church, the body of Christ. Through baptism, the Holy Spirit makes

His dwelling in the human heart and consecrates the bodies of believers as temples of His holiness. In baptism, we are joined to God and to each other in Christ.

In the Old Testament, people became part of the community of faith and were joined to the covenant God made through Moses, by circumcision. Ritual washings symbolically prepared people to enter the temple, where sacrifices were offered for the forgiveness of sin. Jesus fulfilled the work of the temple by the sacrifice of His body on the cross. He sacrificed once for the forgiveness of all sin! The covenant God made through Moses was between Himself and the Jews. The covenant God made through Jesus extends to all people. The first covenant was with the Jews and so circumcision was only for Jews and only male Jews at that. The new covenant is for all people. Baptism replaced circumcision as the means by which believers are joined to God and made part of the covenant community and is offered for all to receive, both male and female.

Baptisms were important to religious Jews of the first century, as a means of spiritual devotion and religious preparation. Ritual washings prepared them to meet God in the temple service. John's baptism was so important that people came from all over the country to be baptized by him. John's baptism was important, because it pointed to and identified Jesus as the Christ. John's baptism was so important that Jesus came to be baptized by him. When Jesus was baptized the heavens were rent asunder, the Holy Spirit descended as a dove and the divine voice declared Him, God's beloved Son. John's baptism was great, but Jesus' baptism is greater. John said, "I have baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Jesus' baptism is greater than John's baptism, because through it, God adopts us as His children, declares us His daughters and sons, forgives our sins and gives the Holy Spirit to dwell within us.

Jesus' baptism is more than a ritual washing and greater than either circumcision or John's baptism, because it is a spiritual cleansing of sin, effected by the Holy Spirit working through the gospel. In the letter to Titus, St. Paul said, "But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that being justified by His grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life." John's baptism was a sign of faith. Jesus' baptism creates faith and gives grace. St. Peter writes, "Baptism...now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

More than a ritual action meant to remind us of sin, Jesus' baptism is a participation in His death and resurrection. In the letter to the Romans, St. Paul asks, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." In baptism Jesus gives the Holy Spirit to dwell within us. The Holy Spirit casts the evil out of our spirits, continuously strengthens our faith with His grace and encourages the expression of our faith in acts of faithfulness.

Jesus' baptism is God's promise of forgiveness, spoken in absolution as often as we confess our sins. Jesus' baptism is the assurance of our share in His resurrection, in bodies made new, in a world in which God dwells in His righteousness. St. Paul concludes his thoughts on Jesus, baptism and the Holy Spirit saying, "For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His." John baptized with the water of repentance. Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit in the gospel of forgiveness, renewal and the promise of resurrection to eternal life. John shows us our sin, but in Jesus we see our Saviour and receive what only He can give: forgiveness and the Holy Spirit to dwell within us. John baptized with water. Jesus baptizes us with the Holy Spirit in faith, forgiveness and resurrection to everlasting life. God grant this to us all. In Jesus' Name. Amen