

Jesus' Baptism

"Follow Me as Savior" Series, October 5 & 6, 2024 | Mark 1:9-11

Rob O'Neal, Senior Pastor

Some things are so familiar that we forget how amazing they are.

Take the wheel for instance.¹

The wheel was likely first developed in Mesopotamia by the Sumerians shortly before 3500 BC.

From there, it looks like people created solid wood disks with a hole for an axle to use as pottery wheels to spin the abundant clay of the Fertile Crescent.

Before 3000 BC, Sumerians were putting solid wooden wheels on things.

From there, wheels began to spring up in other places.

By 2000 BC, the Anatolians developed spoked wheels which were lighter and faster.

From there, the Egyptians put spoked wheels on chariots.

Everything began to change because of wheels. Transportation, agriculture, and trade spread.

Wheels fueled other innovations, like gears and using wind and waterpower.

Today, we can't imagine a society without wheels. We forget just how amazing they are.

The same can be said of Jesus.

Some of us have known Jesus all our lives. It's easy to forget just how much Jesus changed our lives at one point, and it is impossible to realize just how much the whole arc of our lives has been because of Him.

Some of you still have not met Jesus. If that's you, then you may also have a very easy time ignoring Jesus as you live your life. He's sitting there in the background of history and of creation, but you are completely unaware of how much history and life are impacted by Him.

Jesus is amazing! But it's easy to forget just how amazing He is.

Mark focuses our attention on Jesus from the very beginning of the Gospel bearing his name.

He answers questions like, "Who are we?" and "What does Jesus want from us?" But before Mark answers any of these questions, he helps us ask the question, "Who is Jesus?"

The answer to that question helps us answer our questions about who we are and what Jesus wants from us. So, "Who is Jesus?" It's a critical question we simply must answer.

Jesus is the One we expected.

In Mark 1:9, Jesus was baptized "In those days ...":

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

What does that phrase, "in those days," mean? It points back to the beginning of chapter one.

¹ <https://historycooperative.org/who-invented-the-wheel/>

Mark starts by telling us that there was a sense of expectation created by the prophets. For centuries, the prophets had foretold the coming of a Savior, the Messiah. By the first century, there was an eager expectation that the time was at hand for Messiah to come.

John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming that Messiah was about to arrive. He called people to repentance and expectation.

John was a fierce person, but he said plainly that one mightier than he was coming.

To prepare for Messiah, John baptized people. It was an immersion in water symbolizing that a person was repenting of their sin, and waiting for and actively watching for the Messiah.

John said that he was baptizing people with water, but the Messiah would baptize people with the Holy Spirit.

Mark says that in THOSE days Jesus came to be baptized by John.

Mark is using the language of hope.

I'm not sure that we are living in that kind of moment right now. I'm not sure that these are days of hope and expectation for most of us.

I think that these are days of worry and concern. We're not so much expecting what might go right. We are more worrying about what IS going wrong and what MIGHT go wrong. As I listen to people talk, these don't feel like days of expectation. They feel like days of despair.

Despair comes naturally. You may be experiencing it right now.

You may be watching the news all the time and find yourself coming away worried. Or anxious.

You may be down about where the election is going and where the country is going.

You may be down about the weather and the climate.

You may despair over what's happening in the Middle East or Ukraine or the Sudan.

You may despair about the economy or your own personal economy.

You may be losing hope because of what's going on with kids and students and young adults.

You may be losing hope for your family, your health, or your job.

Despair comes naturally. And easily.

But Jesus embodies hope that has been pulsing throughout history.

When creation dawned, Jesus was the hope pulsing throughout creation.

When humanity sinned, God said that Jesus would one day come and defeat sin.

When God's people failed, God promised that Jesus would not fail.

When Jesus died on the cross, hope was pulsing still. The resurrection sent a shockwave of hope throughout creation—a new beginning.

And now, history lives anticipating the return of Jesus, the end of sin, and the end of suffering.

Dare to hope in Jesus even though despair comes naturally.

Despair is natural. It's easy. It comes quickly. We can stay there, and despair starts to feel like a comfortable pair of shoes we've owned for a long time. Despairing together and being the voice of worry feel powerful and magnetic. Despair is natural.

But Jesus brings hope. Jesus introduces something new to history and our lives, if we let it.
Can you dare to hope in Jesus even though despair comes naturally?

Jesus is the One who opens heaven.

Then in Mark 1:10 Jesus saw a vision after His baptism:

And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.

As soon as Jesus came up out of the water, he saw something.

Jesus had a vision. In this vision, Jesus saw something that actually happened.

But the people standing around couldn't see what Jesus saw.

God "tore" heaven open when Jesus was baptized.

In the Old Testament, it was common to think of heaven and earth as being open to one another. God appeared to His people. God spoke through prophets. God was present in the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem.

But as the Old Testament closed, God's people sensed that heaven was closed. The glory of God departed from the Temple in Jerusalem. The prophets went silent. Heaven was closed.

So, Jesus saw something new and important. Heaven was torn open. Mark uses a verb here that is significant. "Tear" is the closest way to truly translate it.

It refers to **Isaiah 64:1** where the prophet cried out for this day:

***Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains might quake at
your presence ...***

Isaiah longed for closed heaven to be opened. He went on to say that it would be an earth-shattering event. It would lead to judgment. Awesome things were about to happen! God was about to meet with His people! Pay attention!

Mark is saying that in Jesus, heaven has come to earth. And in Jesus, heaven is now open again to earth. Everything has changed.

Jesus saw God the Holy Spirit "descending on him".

Jesus saw God the Holy Spirit, floating gently down.

Mark said that it was like the movement of a dove.

Our English Bibles say that God the Holy Spirit came "on" Jesus. The word in Greek is much stronger. It's like God the Holy Spirit touched Jesus and then went INTO Jesus.

God the Holy Spirit was now in Jesus, empowering Him and His mission.

But Jesus does what He does AS God not just WITH God.

Jesus IS God in the flesh.

AS God, Jesus forgave sin, healed the sick, and cast out demons.

AS God, Jesus stilled the storm, multiplied bread and fish, and walked on water,

AS God, Jesus told us what the Law said and meant.

AS God, Jesus died to pay the price for our sin and rose again from the dead.
This is the power of God at work in the world.

Are we relying on Jesus, the life of heaven, and His power, or on ourselves?

Heaven is open.

The power of God is at work in you and around you.

The voice of God is calling to you.

Are you relying on Jesus, the life of heaven, and the power of God?

Or are you doing everything on your own and by your own power?

Anne Sexton was clearly relying on herself, not on God, in the poem "Rowing."

Anne Sexton was a great mid-twentieth-century poet.

She focused on everyday relationships as a way to explore the deeper places of our souls.

She had a difficult life and struggled repeatedly with mental illness.

For her, God was always someone she was reaching for but could not bring herself to find.

She wrote:

**God was there like an island I had not rowed to,
still ignorant of Him, my arms, and my legs worked ...
... I am rowing, I am rowing
though the oarlocks stick and are rusty ...
... though the wind pushes me back...**

Can you hear her pain, her striving, and the sheer effort of it all?

She had hope that if she rowed her way to God, God would take the pain inside and do something about it, but she was more concerned with making her way to God than with letting God claim her.²

Rely on Jesus and not yourself.

We like to rely on ourselves.

We like to think that we are sufficient or that we can become sufficient to do anything we want or need to do. It is difficult for us to rely on anyone other than ourselves.

But the Bible tells us that there are things we cannot do for ourselves. We cannot work our way to God. We cannot save ourselves.

We have to rely on Jesus. Only Jesus can save us. Only Jesus can open the heavens for us.

Mark only used the verb "tore" one other time in the Gospel according to Mark. It's in **Mark 15:38** immediately after Jesus died on the cross:

And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

² <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/anne-sexton>

That curtain in the Temple symbolized the barrier between the sacred and the non-sacred spaces, between the glory of God and the people of God, between heaven and earth.

Jesus opened the barrier between heaven and earth, between us and God, finally and forever.

Rely on Jesus and not yourself.

Jesus is the Son of God.

God the Father affirms that Jesus is “beloved” in Mark 1:11:

And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

This is the voice of God the Father.

God the Father is saying that he loves God the Son.

We’re also hearing an affirmation from heaven of Jesus. God the Son took on human flesh, was born as a human being, grew up, grew in wisdom and stature as He grew, has prepared Himself for ministry ahead, and is now coming to be baptized and to begin work. God the Father is saying, “That’s my boy, and I am pleased and proud!” What an affirmation to hear!

But the word translated “beloved” can also be translated “unique” or “only”.

Jesus truly is unique.

Abraham was called a friend of God. (Isaiah 41:8)

Moses was a servant of God. (Deuteronomy 34:5)

Aaron was a chosen one of God. (Psalm 105:26)

David was a man after God’s own heart. (1 Samuel 13:14)

Paul was an apostle of God. (Romans 1:1)

Israel is called a son of God. (Exodus 4:23) So was the king as Israel’s leader. (Psalm 2:7)³

But where Israel and the kings failed, Jesus now steps forward. There is no one like Him.

Some things can’t be replaced.

Artificial intelligence is doing all kinds of things for us these days.

AI can help with flight reservations and research.

Some companies have worked to create artificial intelligence friends for people.

Replika is one such company. Replika was started to create AI friends to fill a need in our lives for companionship. Of course, people have created virtual romantic partners.

When the company was starting nearly a decade ago, a close friend of the founder died.

As she grieved, she wondered if she could create a chatbot to mimic him.

She collected all the text messages and written correspondence her friend left behind.

Replika fed the information into its algorithm. And out came an AI version of her deceased friend. His name was “Roman.” Now everyone who knew him could interact with AI Roman.

AI Roman responds to text messages just like real-life Roman would have.

³ Edwards, 38.

Some of his friends and family members found AI Roman comforting. They chatted with AI Roman, told AI Roman things they wished they had said to real-life Roman, and asked AI Roman for advice.

But not everyone found AI Roman real. Or relatable. Some people found AI Roman to be still quite different from real-life Roman. And others thought the whole enterprise was just wrong.⁴

And they're right. There is no replacing real-life Roman. He was unique. And real.

No one can replace real-life Jesus either, no matter how hard we try and no matter how sophisticated our algorithms and tools. Jesus is unique. And real.

Does your own history imply that Jesus can be replaced?

One pretty common life story that implies that Jesus can be replaced starts like this, "My family went to church until I got confirmed. Then we stopped." Jesus was replaced with football. Or shopping. Or sleeping late.

Then, that common life story goes that the family still would worship on Easter and at Christmas. Those were just preludes to the real party, and you tried to replace Jesus with a party.

Then, that pretty common life story involves going to college and running headfirst into arguments against the existence of God. Then, you replace Jesus with philosophy. Or science.

Then, that pretty common life story involves chasing after jobs and romance and money and children and everything else. They all try to replace Jesus.

And you wouldn't want to appear "religious" because that would embarrass you in front of your friends, and even they can be an attempted substitute for Jesus.

But then that life story includes a still-nagging sense that Jesus is important, that I might somehow or someday need Him. But then we replace Jesus with the idea that we'll get to it "someday" and "someday" suddenly is another attempted replacement for Jesus.

Treat Jesus as unique and not as someone who can be replaced.

Jesus can't be replaced.

He is unique. Beloved by the Father.

He deserves to be beloved by you.

Turn to Jesus.

The evidence was everywhere in Pompeii in 79 AD that it was time to do something.

Mount Vesuvius had not erupted in centuries. No one even remembered it erupting.

But the signs were there that something was happening in the volcano.

Pliny the Younger, an author and statesman at the time, wrote and described it.

Earthquakes had been building for years. They became increasingly frequent and opened fissures in the ground. Gasses billowed up from the ground. Animals started behaving erratically. Wells and springs mysteriously dried up.⁵

⁴ <https://www.theverge.com/a/luka-artificial-intelligence-memorial-roman-mazurenko-bot>

⁵ https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/pompeii_portents_01.shtml

Something was happening. Some people grabbed their things and left.

Then there was an explosion. A massive column of ash surged into the air.

Across the bay, Pliny the Elder (an important Roman official himself and uncle of Pliny the Younger) saw it all. He was also a scientist. He had just taken a bath when the eruption started and watched the eruption with curiosity.

More people left the city and fled from the eruption.

The winds turned and brought the ash to Pompeii. Pumice and ash fell on Pompeii at the rate of 4-6 inches per hour. After hours of that much ash, roofs began to collapse.

This was the point at which Pliny the Younger and his mother fled. For their lives.

Pliny the Elder took a bath and sat down to supper, watching the scene unfold. He went indoors away from the falling ash and stone, went to sleep, and snored loudly. As the courtyard of the house filled with ash and debris, he was awakened. He and his companions decided to leave the house whose walls were now threatening to collapse from the repeated earthquakes. He made for the shore where he was engulfed in a cloud of gas and died.⁶

Not much later, Vesuvius unleashed pyroclastic surges. Nearly 1000-degree clouds of gas, ash, and debris cascaded down the mountain toward Pompeii. Those who remained stayed at this point because it was just too late. The pyroclastic surges engulfed Pompeii, instantly killing those left in the path.⁷

Don't ignore the evidence.

Jesus is the One we expected, the One we are all hoping for!

Jesus has opened Heaven.

Jesus is the Son of God! He cannot be replaced.

It's like the earth is quaking, the ground is splitting, the gas is billowing, and the animals are crying out that something is happening.

Don't sit there stoically.

That's what Pliny the Elder did. He watched the eruption, kept up with the business of the Empire, and tried to go on as if everything were normal.

Don't ignore what you're seeing and hearing about Jesus. It's true!

Don't ignore the tug that you're feeling in your heart. That's the voice of God the Holy Spirit.

Don't pretend that none of it matters.

Don't go on with the charade that nothing has changed and that life is normal.

God the Father is calling to you, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased."

What are you going to do with Him?

Don't wait until it's too late.

⁶ <http://www.pompeii.org.uk/s.php/tour-the-two-letters-written-by-pliny...ut-the-eruption-of-vesuvius-in-79-a-d-history-of-pompeii-en-238-s.htm>

⁷ <https://www.thecollector.com/what-happened-vesuvius-erupted/>

Some people in Pompeii just waited until it was too late. They refused to act when there was time. Then there was nothing to do but wait for the fiery cloud to arrive.

There is, of course, a point at which Jesus will return, and that's too late. It's judgment day then.

There is also the point at which we ourselves die. That's when our decision is set in concrete. There is no turning back from that point.

There is even a point at which we've made up our minds. We've said "no" to God so many times that we can't hear Him calling to us any longer. The voice of God the Holy Spirit is drowned out. We've closed the door to our hearts and lives from the inside, and God respects our choice. That's too late. Don't wait until it's too late.

Turn to Jesus. It's time.