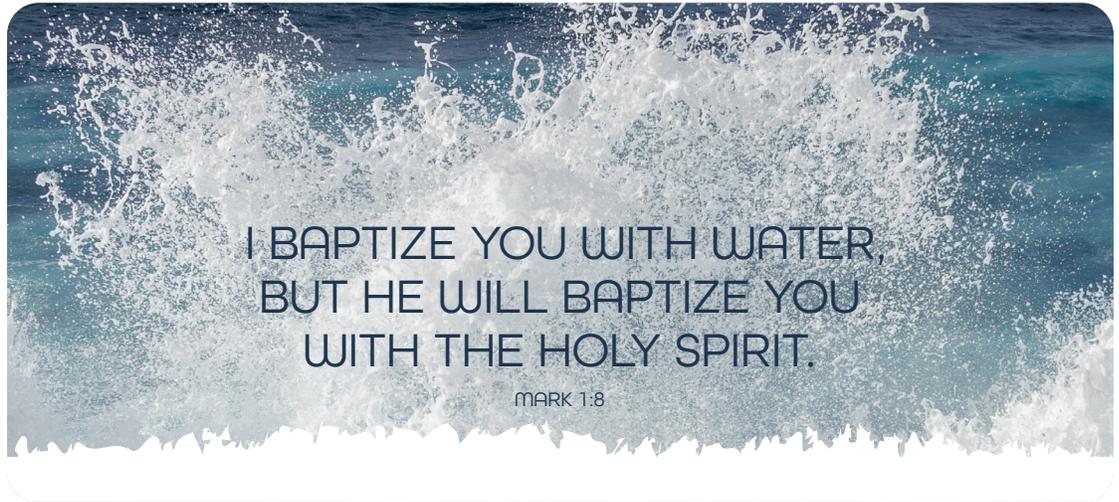


2021
**JAN
10**



FAITH AND RENEWAL

MARK 1:4-11

FRED MOLLON

Today is when we celebrate the baptism of Jesus. By most marks, this is considered to be the start of Jesus' public ministry. As we follow his life in the gospels, it's from this point onward that we see his ministry expand, leading to his crucifixion.

Baptism is probably the oldest of the church's sacraments. As we read through the New Testament, baptism is the one consistent thing we see in every situation. After Peter's speech on Pentecost 3000, new believers were baptized. Philip is transported to meet up with an Ethiopian, and when he confesses his faith, he is baptized. After Peter preaches in the home of Cornelius and they believe, Peter baptizes them. Again, in Philippi, when the jailer asks what he must do, Paul tells him to believe in Jesus and then baptizes him and his family. On and on the stories go.

When we read Paul's epistles, baptism is a standard reference as he teaches about the believer's life. The writings of the church fathers also teach that baptism is an essential aspect of a believer's life. In an early work called "The Didache," which is a compilation of teachings of the apostles, baptism is one of the covered topics. This small section even gives instructions on how we are to baptize believers.



In our day, baptism still has a vital role within the life of the body. Not long ago, we witnessed the baptism of Eli Wuco, and before that, Jake Hogue. We have even witnessed the baptism of older children and adults, and I'm sure each of us was baptized. Some were baptized as infants, some as older children or adults. Some had water sprinkled; others were immersed. Some experienced both. I remember with joy having the privilege of baptizing both of my children in the Jordan River when we lived in Palestine. Let's turn now to the gospel of Mark and read his account of Jesus' baptism.

[Mark 1:4-11]

The scene opens with John, a cousin of Jesus and the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, preaching in the wilderness near the Jordan River. Later on, Jesus gives testimony to John, stating that he was the prophet who would precede the coming Messiah and open the way for him. In Judaism, this prophet was Elijah, the forerunner of the Messiah, as stated in Malachi 4. It had been many long years since a prophet had appeared in Israel, so John aroused curiosity. We are told that many people came to hear his preaching and were brought to repentance and were baptized by John.

The primary focus of John's preaching was the coming of the Messiah and that he was preparing the way for him. I have often wondered what the people who heard John thought about this. Did they understand? We know that at that time, the Messiah was the object of much of the religious thought. They were expecting him. They even expected him to be a divine figure. Did John's preaching make this more of a reality? We don't know, but it was at this time that a certain man from Nazareth came to John. Not to hear him preach, but to be baptized by him.

It's fitting that Jesus' ministry began in this way and that it happened in the wilderness. In the Old Testament, the Hebrews had wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. God gave them the promise that they were heading to the land in which they would build their nation. After

many trials and failures, victories, and defeats, they were now at the point of entry. Moses had died as well as most of the leaders who had led them out of Egypt. This was a new generation, and they had a new leader, Joshua. As they face their new life, God leads them through the Jordan to take possession of this land with Joshua at the helm.

Here they are again, returning to the Jordan River to begin to possess the land that God is giving to them, but this time, it's not a physical land. It's the real Kingdom of God. Jesus stated many times that His appearance meant that God's kingdom was now among them. He was ushering in a new age. As the One leading the people, it was only right that this new Joshua would enter into the water as the first Joshua did. As Jesus, or Joshua, comes up out of the water, God speaks to confirm that he is indeed the chosen one.

The Hebrews spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness. The wilderness speaks of chaos and disorder. The wilderness is the place where all kinds of evil can take place. The promised land speaks of the place of grace and mercy. It is the place where people are once again welcomed into the presence of God. It is the place where God's Temple is found. It is the place where God's people dwell in safety. This is the kingdom into which Jesus is leading. His kingdom is not of this world. Jesus doesn't concern himself with the politics of the day. Instead, his concern is for people and how we live with one another and care for one another. His kingdom is one that demonstrates the heart of God, and in doing so, it accomplishes what the first kingdom did not do. This new kingdom becomes a witness to all of God's children, whether Hebrew or not, and draws people from every tribe and nation, from every people and tongue, and welcomes them. No one is excluded. Jesus leads us through the Jordan river, out of the wilderness, and into the presence of God.

The second thing that Jesus' baptism shows us is that this new kingdom, into which he is leading us, is inaugurated by the Holy Spirit.

John said that he baptized with water, but the one coming after him, would baptize with the Holy Spirit. We read that as Jesus comes up out of the water, the Holy Spirit descends upon him like a dove. Remember back in Genesis, after God created Adam, he breathed on him, and he became a living being. The word for breath, wind, and spirit is the same in both Hebrew and Greek. In effect, we can say that God “spirited” Adam. Jesus is the second Adam, and so in like fashion God breathes upon him, and the Messiah becomes “a living being.” He is empowered by God to now do what the first Adam failed to do, to lead many sons to glory.

This is played out further after Jesus’ resurrection. We read that when Jesus met with his disciples that he breathed upon them, he gave them the gift of the Spirit also. The church became a living being. At Pentecost, as the disciples are gathered in the upper room, the Spirit descends upon them all. Peter preaches to the crowd that has gathered, and they too receive the Holy Spirit. Paul is traveling to Damascus and is encountered by the risen Jesus. When his sight is restored, he is empowered by the Spirit. Peter preaches to Cornelius and his household, and the Spirit descends upon them just as on the day of Pentecost. The stories continue like this. In Acts 19, Paul comes upon a group of believers who say that they were baptized into John’s baptism. Paul teaches them about the Messiah, and they, too, believe and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God’s gift of power so that his people can live and move in this world. As it says, we are in the world, not of it. The first group to cross the Jordan had swords and battle gear to conquer the land and take possession. As followers of Jesus, we are given something more powerful, the Holy Spirit. Paul describes a believer ready for life in this new kingdom. We have the helmet of salvation and the breastplate of righteousness. We are girded with truth, and our feet wear the shoes of the gospel of peace. We carry the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God. As the psalmist wrote, some trust in chariots, some in horses, but we remember the name of the Lord our God.

Finally, our baptism symbolizes our participation in Jesus’ death and our new life in Christ. As we are covered in the water, whether by immersion or by having it sprinkled on our heads, we symbolically die to this world, and then as we come up, are raised to new life. Paul states in Romans that we were baptized into Jesus’ death. Therefore, we were buried with Christ in baptism, and just as he was raised from the dead, we should walk in newness of life. Because of our baptism, we are now one body, and all of the cultural, social, and even gender divisions are done away with. Everyone has an equal place in God’s kingdom. In Colossians, Paul states that we were raised to new life. While we were dead in our sin, God forgave us, canceled the debt that condemned us, and nailed it to the cross, and made a public spectacle of all that stood against us, triumphing over it by the cross.

Our baptism also is our receiving of the Holy Spirit. Just as Jesus received the Holy Spirit to embark on the mission set before him, we, too, have the Holy Spirit’s comfort, guidance, and to be our defender. We are not left alone. By the power and gifts of the Spirit, we can be God’s people in this world, demonstrating the grace, and mercy, and kindness of God. We can be the lights shining in the darkness of all the chaos and strife that we see, and we can help lead them to God. In Jesus, we are the temple of God and are being built into a beautiful dwelling for him.

As we go from this time, let’s not forget the meaning of our baptism. Let’s remember the example we have in Jesus. Most of all, let’s remember that as children of God, we have been given the same equipment that empowered Jesus, and we can live in this world and not be “of the world.” Don’t you know that you are the temple of the Holy Spirit, filled with grace, and power, and glory? Therefore, walk as children of light.

Amen.