

Sometimes you find people where you least expect them to be. A couple years ago, I was preaching for a midweek Lenten service at Victory of the Lamb in Katy. And I noticed a face I recognized in the crowd. He’s a friend who went to Minnesota Valley Lutheran High School with me 15 years earlier. Now, if I were at an MVL alumni gathering or even visiting New Ulm, MN, I might expect to run into him. But 15 years later and 1800 miles south in Houston, TX? That I wasn’t expecting. After the service, I greeted him with a, “What are you doing here?”

I’m sure it’s happened to you before, too. Maybe you were on vacation far from home and you ran into someone who lives down the street from you. Or you happened to be on the same flight with someone you hadn’t seen in years. When we find people where we least expect them to be, we ask, “What are you doing here?”

You can’t help but ask the same question about Jesus’ baptism. We heard about John the Baptist’s ministry in Advent – how he was calling sinners to repentance and washing their sins away in the Jordan River. But Jesus is no sinner. He has nothing to repent of, no sins to wash away. The last place you might expect Jesus to be is in those waters being baptized! In Matthew’s account, even John is surprised, and essentially asks, “Jesus, what are you doing here?”

This morning, we’ll ask that question with him as we study this lesson together. No, Jesus wasn’t in the wrong place. He was exactly where he should be and where we needed him to be. And we’ll see that what God accomplished through Jesus’ baptism is very similar to what he still does through ours. What’s Jesus doing here? 1) He’s revealing himself as Savior, and 2) he’s receiving gifts for his calling.

¹⁵ The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. ¹⁶ John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

²¹ When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

I. He’s revealing himself as Savior

The crowds coming out to John in the wilderness were confused. Luke says they were all whispering and wondering **if John might possibly be the Christ** – the Savior God promised. And you can understand why they might think that. After all, in the Old Testament, God called the coming Savior a prophet – and John wore prophet’s clothes and did prophet’s work. He had also promised the Christ would take away sin – and wasn’t John washing people’s sins away in the Jordan? You can understand why they might think John is the Savior – but they were dead wrong. John was just another sinner in need of saving!

But I guess it's not all that different than *our* natural confusion. No, we know John isn't the Savior. But by nature we think that another sinner can be my Savior – me. That if I just do enough good, or say the right things, God will be pleased with me. We know we're not perfect, but who is? So we assume God must grade on a curve, and if we try hard enough and end up better than most, God will be pleased. It's understandable to think that way. I mean if sin is the mess that I got myself into, shouldn't I be able to get myself out of it? Understandable...but dead wrong.

Listen to what John had to say: ¹⁶ **John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."**

So John cleared up the crowd's confusion. "I'm not the Christ," he said. "That's the one coming after me, and he's way more powerful than I am. I pour water on you – he'll pour out the Spirit and fire on Pentecost. I warn of God's coming judgment, but he's the one who will be doing the judging!"

But he clears up ours, too. It may seem strange that John describes Jesus as a powerful, perfect judge. But part of what John did at the Jordan was getting people to give up on any idea of their own righteousness. God isn't a judge who grades on a curve. His standard isn't "try hard" or "better than most." It's perfect, sinless.

John knew that. Did you hear what he said about himself? "I'm not worthy to untie his sandals." Here's the one who looked so good, crowds thought he was Christ! But John knew God looks past pious exteriors and sees the sin in our hearts. That even our "good" is not perfect, so it's just more sin. That in his eyes, there's only wheat and chaff, sinless like he is or sinful and fit for the fire – and that's John. And us.

That's why what happens next is so wonderful. ²¹ **When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too.** Can you picture it in your mind's eye? I see the crowds forming a line to be baptized by John. And then quietly, unassumingly, Jesus steps into the line right along with them.

What's he doing there? Everyone in that line has one thing in common – they're all bringing sins they need washed away. You'd expect them to be there! But not Jesus. What does the Father say of him? "With you I am well-pleased." What's the sinless Son of God doing standing in the place of sinners?

The answer is the best of news: This is why he came. To stand in the place of sinners. We could never save ourselves, but because he loved us, he came to do what we could not. And to do that, he took our place.

It's the answer to all the unexpected places we find him. What's God the Son, who belongs in heaven, doing in human flesh and blood here on earth? He came to take your place. To live the sinless life you haven't for you, and give you his sinlessness. What's the only One who never did anything wrong doing on a cross, dying a criminal's death? He's taking your place. Suffering the fire of God's punishment for your sins in your place, to save you from it.

And at his baptism, he revealed that to the world: He's our substitute and our Savior. And just so the crowds couldn't miss it, God the Father revealed it, too: "You are my Son, whom I love, with you I am well-pleased." And God the Holy Spirit did, too, coming down on him in the form of the dove, marking him as the Anointed One, the Christ, the promised Savior.

But at your baptism, he revealed it to you. Compared to Jesus', yours might not have seemed all that spectacular. No booming voice; no doves from heaven. Just water with Words. Seems like the least likely place you'd expect God to be! But he was there. What was he doing there? God the Holy Spirit was there, revealing Jesus to you as *your* Savior. God the Son was there, washing sins away and wrapping you in his holiness. Heaven was opened to you, and God the Father said of you for Jesus' sake, "You are my child; with you I am well-pleased."

II. *He's receiving gifts for his calling*

But God didn't just give us blessings through our baptism. He gave Jesus blessings through his. No, not forgiveness – that he didn't need! But another answer to that question: What's Jesus doing here in his baptism? He's receiving gifts to carry out his calling as our Savior.

Still, that might seem strange. He's true God – isn't he all-powerful? What could he possibly need? But to save us, he became one of us and humbled himself – chose not to make use of his power as God. Instead, chose to be strengthened and assured in the same ways we are – and one of them is baptism.

He received the Spirit's power. And next chapter, we see why he did – he heads into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, a struggle that left him so weak, angels had to attend to him. Weak...but the winner. The Spirit empowered him to resist the devil's temptations and win our righteousness.

And he received assurance of the Father's love. Think of how comforting that must have been for Jesus! When the Father's will left him for 40 days without food in the wilderness, when he was despised and rejected by men, when the dark clouds of judgment rolled over him on the cross...when all evidence of the Father's love seemed absent...to remember what he heard at his baptism: "You are my Son, whom I love, with you I am well-pleased."

I think it's important to emphasize this. Because we tend to think of baptism as what God did for me in the past – but not see how much we need it in the present. But if Jesus' baptism gave him comfort and strength for his calling, isn't it arrogant to assume we don't need the same?

Aren't we heading out into the wilderness everyday? Whatever your calling in life – child, parent, spouse, student, employer – don't the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh meet us there to tempt us to sin in it? Then go back to your baptism every day! When you do, you'll find the same faithful Jesus still ready to wash away all your failures, the same God who strengthens the weary, Spirit who fills you with his power to continue in the struggle.

Aren't there times in life when it seems like the Father's love is absent, too? When what the Father sends us is painful? When people we love turn their backs on us? When the dark clouds of sickness or sadness or loneliness roll over us? When guilt weighs heavy and Satan's accusations ring in our ears? Then run back to your baptism! And hear again and believe that what the Father said of

you then for Jesus' sake is still what he says of you now: "You are my forgiven child, whom I love – with you I am well-pleased."

What's Jesus doing here? You might not expect to find Jesus in the Jordan. But when you know his love and why he came, there's no other place he would be. The Son of God took the place of sinners, and won us a place we'd otherwise never expect to be – a place in God's family, a home in heaven. Until you get there, expect to find him in word, supper, and in your baptism. Return there regularly, and he'll never fail to give you all you need. Amen.

But did you notice – whom the Father from heaven was speaking to? He said it so the crowds could hear it, but he said it to Jesus – for his benefit. "You are my Son whom I love, with you I am well-pleased." And if you keep reading in Luke, you see the Holy Spirit who came down on Jesus remained with him. Three times he says it: "Jesus, full of the Spirit...led by the Spirit...in the power of the Spirit."

That might seem strange at first – Jesus received blessings at his baptism. He's true God – isn't he all-powerful? What could he possibly need? But to save us, he became one of us and humbled himself – chose not to make use of his power as God. Instead, chose to be strengthened and assured in the same ways we are – and one of them is baptism. What's Jesus doing in the Jordan? Receiving gifts for his calling as our Savior.

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And did you notice – John recognized he was the latter? Here’s the one who looked so good, people thought he *was* the Christ! But John knew God looks past pious exteriors and sees the sin in our hearts. That even our “good” isn’t perfect and is just more sin. So he said, “I’m not worthy to untie his sandals.” We have to say the same.

So John cleared up the crowd’s confusion. “I’m not the Christ,” he said. “That’s the one coming after me, and he’s way more powerful than I am. I pour water on you – he’ll pour out the Spirit and fire on Pentecost. I warn of God’s coming judgment, but he’s the one who will be doing the judging! I’m not even worthy to untie his shoes.”

But he clears up ours, too. Think of it: John looked so good on the outside, people thought he was the Christ! But he knows God sees past that pious exterior to the reality of his sin. He knows even his good doesn’t meet God’s standard of perfect, and is just more sin.

It may seem strange that John describes Jesus as a powerful, perfect judge. But part of what John did at the Jordan was getting people to give up on any idea of their own righteousness. God isn’t a judge who grades on a curve. His standard isn’t “try hard” or “better than most.” It’s perfect. For him, there’s only wheat and chaff, sinless like he is or sinful and fit for the fire.

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John says, “I’m not the Savior. The One coming after me is, and he’s way greater than I. I pour out water for forgiveness, but he’s gonna pour out the Holy Spirit with fire on Pentecost. I warn of God’s coming judgment, but he’s the one who will be doing the judging!”

And then did you notice what John said about himself? "I'm not worthy to untie his shoes." John looked so good on the outside, people thought he was the Christ! But John knows God isn't fooled by outward appearance. That even his "good" isn't good enough for God.

And maybe that clears up our confusion, too – any notion we have of doing enough to meet God's approval. God sees past that to our sin.

But maybe it clears up our confusion, too - any notion that we have of being good enough to meet God's approval. John looked so good on the outside people thought he was the Christ! But he said, "Not worthy to untie shoes." Because he knows the judge sees past appearances to the reality of his sin.

Do we see the same? Put on good front...God sees past it? Past faithful spouse on outside to unfaithfulness on inside...past faithful church attendance to how unfaithful we listen while here...past kind and caring appearance to the anger and bitterness on the inside...past even the shiny exterior of the good we do to the sinful and selfish motives that are always there.

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And I'm not even worthy to untie his shoes, because I'm a sinner."

The peoples' confusion about Jesus...

- Understandable why they whisper and wonder, "Could he be the One?"
 - o Prophet – John was that.
 - o Take away sins – and wasn't John's baptism washing away sins for penitent sinners?
- Understandable...but dead wrong. Not the Savior, just another sinner himself!

Our own confusion about that...

- Sinner we think is our Savior is myself!
 - o Understandable: Sin my problem...I need to fix it!
 - o Understandable, but dead wrong.
- John cleared up for the crowd.
 - o He wasn't one – one coming after was.
 - o He washed with water, Savior would pour out Spirit with fire.
 - o He warned of judgment, Jesus is the one who'd do the judging!
- Clears it up for us, too?
 - o Any notion we have of being good enough to meet God's approval.
 - o After all, John is so good on outside that people think he's the Christ! But what did he say? "Not worthy..." Because he knows judge isn't fooled by outward appearances.
 - o For us...
 - o Burned along with chaff...

Jesus' baptism...

- What is Jesus doing here?
 - o The judge, not judging...but standing with sinners?
 - o The Father's approval – only one who never sinned – coming to baptism?
 - o What's he doing here?
- Answer: Best of news!
 - o Could be asked of all Jesus' life. He's God...what's he doing here, in this world, in human flesh, with sinners?
 - o He's the only holy one – what's he doing, cross like criminal, dying a sinner's death?
- Came to take our place.
 - o We could never live holy life God requires...he was and would and did. In our place.
 - o In our place on cross –
- Jesus revealed about self...
- Or –

We're not Savior...

What was Jesus doing there? God could show world he is...

- Spirit's descent in fulfillment of prophecy.
- Father's voice to indicate.

But doesn't fully answer question. Why now, at Baptism?

Lining up sinners...Jesus takes a place among them...what's Jesus doing here?

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 - We could never live holy life God requires...he was and would and did. In our place.
 - In our place on cross –
- Jesus revealed about self – world's Savior...Father Spirit, too...
- Your baptism might not seem all that spectacular.
 - Triune God present...
 - Revealing your Savior...
 - Spirit, Father, Son, what they do...
- **¹⁶John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."**