

Baptism of Our Lord, Gospel Year B

God's Gift of Baptism

Baptism of Our Lord

Mark 1:4-11

Analysis by Brad Haugen

4John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

9In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Author's Note: The following analysis provides a scenario in which a pastor is preparing a mother and father to have their child baptized. Perhaps aspects of what follows relate to your own ministry around Holy Baptism. A human understanding of baptism is challenged and transformed by an encounter with the Law and Gospel of Christ.



DIAGNOSIS: Guilty and Unworthy

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): What Grandma wants, Grandma gets

The parents of a young child want to have him baptized. They haven't been to church in a while, but their parents and grandparents are active in the local congregation. The grandmother, who has been a lifelong member of the church, is disappointed that the couple hasn't had the child baptized yet. The couple decides that it's time: They feel guilty about disappointing Grandma; they don't know how much longer she has to live, and they want her to see her great-grandchild baptized.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): We'd be bad parents if we didn't

As the couple discusses their child's baptism, the father recalls that his parents had him baptized. The mother was baptized too, but didn't grow up in the church at all. The father doesn't remember his baptism—since he was young when it happened, but his parents have told him about it. He knows he

was also confirmed, but doesn't remember much about it except for Confirmation Sunday. As they talk, the father suddenly feels guilty that he hasn't given his child what his parents and grandparents gave him. He expresses his guilt to his wife, who says she will support whatever he decides. He has a lingering feeling that he might be a bad parent unless they have their child baptized, enrolled in Sunday school, and eventually participating in Confirmation. "When it comes to church, I need to do a better job for our son than I've done for myself," the father says.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Not worthy

When the couple meets with the pastor to discuss the baptism, the pastor is delighted. She asks them why they would like to have their child baptized. The father replies that his grandmother wanted them to do it, so he wants to honor and respect her wishes. He also tells the pastor how he would like his son to be more involved in church than he has been. Baptism is a good start, he says, and as parents he and his wife believe it's the right thing to do.

"But what does God say about baptism?" the pastor asks them. The couple doesn't understand the question. "You just gave me a human understanding of baptism," the pastor continues, "but let's take a look at what God says." The pastor, who had been to a Crossings conference or two, refers them to Mark 1:4-11 about John baptizing Jesus, as she opens her Bible. "Baptism brings us into the presence of God. But like John, when we come into the presence of God, we become aware that we are not worthy," the pastor explains. "I understand you wanting to honor and respect your grandmother. And I can appreciate you wanting to be good parents and to do better for your son by getting him baptized and involved in the church. But none of those reasons or motivations for having him baptized make him worthy or deserving

of baptism.

The truth is, not one of us is worthy of the relationship with God that baptism draws us into—no one. Do you understand what I mean? That's what John the baptizer is explaining to us, when he says this about Jesus: 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit' (Mark 1:7-8).

"But we're just getting to the good part. I'd like to meet with you again to continue discussing your son's baptism," the pastor says.

"I'm confused," the mother says. "How can our son be baptized if he's not worthy? How can any of us be baptized if we're not worthy?"

"Let's save that for next time," the pastor says as she smiles.

PROGNOSIS: Gifted and Worthy



Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Worthy because of Jesus

“Okay, what do we have left to do before he’s baptized?” the father asks.

“How about we take a different approach?” the pastor replies. “None of us is worthy of God. None of us is worthy of the relationship that God that God establishes with us in baptism. Remember what John the baptizer said about Jesus? That’s right: ‘I am not worthy.’”

“Let’s look at Mark 1:4-11 again. Okay, John has hit us with the hard truth that none of us is worthy of baptism, not even your son. That’s uncomfortable news; it should hurt. But that’s not all there is to it. In the next part of this story, Jesus comes to John for baptism. John the baptizer knows he’s not worthy of being in Jesus’ presence—Jesus is the coming Messiah; and that means John is especially not worthy of baptizing Jesus. And John is right: Jesus doesn’t have to be baptized by John. Jesus is

already worthy of God; he is God's Son. But Jesus chooses to be baptized by John. And, as John draws him up out of the water, we hear these words coming from the heavens, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased' (Mark 1:11).

"This is the relationship that Jesus has with God: He is God's beloved Son. Jesus is given the gift of God's Spirit—the Holy Spirit. That Spirit enables him to heal and forgive sinners all throughout his ministry. Even as Jesus dies on the cross, he forgives all of us. God raises Jesus—God's beloved Son—from the dead by the power of the Spirit as well. Jesus is baptized in humility by John, and as a result we receive Christ's gifts. In other words, baptism is the gift God gives each of you, and me, and your son—not because we're worthy, but because Jesus wants us to have the same relationship with God that he has."

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Trusting God rather than pleasing the family

The same relationship with God that Jesus has? A child loved by God because God wants to, not because he or his parents have somehow earned it or deserved it? Baptism as a gift? The parents ponder these questions as they look at their son. This is heavy stuff. They'll have to think about it some more. But the father does notice he's perceiving things differently as he leaves the pastor's office this time: Pleasing his grandmother is no longer the point of having his son baptized. He feels the guilt about being a bad parent ease and lift a bit. He doesn't have to make things right for his son, or between him and God, by having the child baptized. He will need to trust that God knows how to make things right between him and God. And, in his son's baptism, God will take care of his child as well.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Spirit-led rather than Grandma-led

Grandma meant well requesting that her grandson and his wife have her great-grandson baptized. But ultimately baptism isn't about pleasing any human—even a beloved great-grandmother. Instead, the parents understand that they are entrusting their child to the God who loves him. Their son receives the promise of the same Holy Spirit that God gave Jesus in his baptism. This promise made the parents curious about where the Spirit would lead them and their family. Perhaps they would meet more people who felt the burdens of family expectations, or parental guilt, or who didn't feel loved and worthy of God or anyone. Perhaps they could invite others into the same loving relationship with God that Jesus had, through the gift of baptism.