

# Baptism of Our Lord, Gospel, Year B

FROM DEAD TO ALIVE

Mark 1:4-11

Baptism of Our Lord

Analysis by Matthew DeLoera

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And 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. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He 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. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And 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. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

DIAGNOSIS: Extremely Dead

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): We Love Extremes  
It's no secret that we live in a polarized society. But it's not just our leaders who make increasingly strident statements. Even our family and friends seem to be losing their filters, especially on social media. Such unprecedented access to information should center us. But no. Polarized voices rule the internet; every blogger knows that's how you attract readers. So it goes for some churches. Surveys show that the fastest-growing

churches are those that swing most conservative or liberal, while mainline congregations decline. But even when we faithfully stick with our mainline congregation, we still nudge it to make a stronger statement, lest we be accused of cheapening grace. No wonder John the Baptizer drew a crowd. Clearly, extremes attract us, and who's more extreme than a hair-shirted, locust-eating, loud-mouthed repentance-demanding baptizer dunking folks in a filthy river?

### Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): We Live by Extremes

Perhaps extreme talk attracts us because it seems so confident and certain. The world's problems squeeze us more tightly each day, and stubbornly defy solutions. Their effects constantly trickle down to each of us, and only emphasize just how powerless we are. But we can't bear that thought, so we turn our attention to what we think we can control—ourselves. We change our lifestyles. We simplify. We get more religious. We make resolutions. We attack everything we hate about ourselves, because we figure we can insulate ourselves from everything that weighs on us. That's why we love encountering someone like John, with his baptism of repentance. He promises to wash away everything we hate about ourselves. He's extreme, but his confidence is intoxicating. We don't hesitate to jump in, fully expecting we will be utterly transformed.

### Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): We Are Extremely Dead

But once we do the deed, does anything really change? We come down from the mountaintop, returning home to the same grind. The pressures of the day and cares of the world weigh just as heavily. Once the glow of John's baptism wears off, we look in the mirror and see the same powerless, contorted soul looking back. The sins we washed away always come back with a vengeance. So much for forgiveness! How could John even make such an extreme promise? After all, who can forgive but God? But maybe

God never really forgives after all. Who could tell? Everyone still dies. Besides, he himself even said as much—that one more powerful was coming. So if nothing ever changes, and John's baptism is so inferior, then what was the point in the first place?

## PROGNOSIS: Extremely Alive

### Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Jesus Makes Us Extremely Alive

But on the day that Jesus is plunged beneath those dirty waters, something extremely different happens. The sinless one, who had no need to be washed, instead receives the world's dirt in the Jordan—and at the very moment when the divine promise is declared. It's no wonder that in that apocalyptic event the heavens had to be torn apart: God was no longer content to be hidden in his beloved Son. At the Jordan, God made loud and clear the unconditional love he had for his Son; and his Son would spend his life making loud and clear that very same love to us. And that's exactly what he did: spent his life for us on the cross, taking our sin, and dying our death so that we would possess his righteousness, without even asking our permission. Talk about extreme! Yet, after three days he had risen so that we could hear and trust the same extreme promise: you are forgiven. Everything is changed.

### Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Jesus Makes Us Extremely Free

By faith we have already experienced that extreme love; now we enjoy complete confidence and certainty in spite of the world's woes. We know better than to trust in ourselves; so instead we trust what God is doing in the world. We no longer toil to become better people, because we know the power of God is made manifest in our weakness. We no longer make resolutions, because we know we will fail ourselves. But we rejoice to know that such

failure is never the last word. We have nothing to lose, because nothing can separate us from the love of God. Our transformation is never complete in this life, yet we have been utterly freed by the beloved Son.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): We Are Extremely Vulnerable for the Sake of the World

Living in such complete freedom, we are free to risk being vulnerable. Even though others may not even seek forgiveness, we are bold to declare the entire forgiveness of their sins in Jesus' name, without their permission. Some will declare us high and mighty loudmouths who pass judgment. Others will accuse us of cheap grace, wasting forgiveness on those who reject it. Except we can't cheapen grace, because Jesus is dying for us to give grace and our very selves away for free. For those who feel crushed, this promise will give utter assurance—just as it did for us. Granted, people may not flock to us like they did to John. But even John knew that he wasn't the main event, so we take heart in others experiencing the love of Jesus through us.