

“The Baptism of Jesus”

January 7, 2018

Our Savior’s Way
Worshiping Sundays 8:00, 9:30, & 11:00 AM
Pastor Bill Mann

The deepest geologic fault on the surface of the earth is the Jordan Rift Valley. Do you know the altitude here?—345 ft. Death Valley, the lowest place in North America, is 282 ft. below sea level. Can you imagine a place that is 1,300 feet below sea level--this is the shore of the Dead Sea—a large, saltwater lake fed by the Jordan River—it’s the lowest place on earth. This weekend thousands of tourists will flock to this area, to a site on the shores of the Jordan River, about five miles north of the Dead Sea and about five miles from Jerusalem. It’s a flat area where the river spreads out into a series of pools. The place is called “Al-Maghtas”. In Arabic the name means “the Baptism.” In 2015 this place was designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. It is the place where John Baptized Jesus in the Jordan River.

The Jordan River comes with a lot of history. The Jordan River is where Joshua, in the Old Testament, told the priests to walk into the flooding waters. The waters parted and the people of Israel walked into the Promised Land on dry ground. The Jordan River is the place where Elijah the prophet was taken up into heaven in a fiery chariot. The Jordan River is the place where Elisha the prophet instructed the commander of the Syrian army, Naaman—“Go dip yourself seven times in the Jordan River.” Naaman followed the prophet’s instructions, he washed himself in the

Jordan River seven times and was cured of leprosy. It was the only time the River Jordan was used to cure a bodily disease.

Today, in the Gospel of Mark, we see the River Jordan being used in a much different way. Mark writes, “John appeared baptizing at the Jordan River , proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Mark begins his Gospel with these words: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” The word “gospel” means “good news”, so, what does that mean? The Apostle Paul writes that the “good news” is this: “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.” (2 Corinthians 5:19) The “good news” is Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ you can have forgiveness, you can have salvation, you can have peace with God, you can have eternal life. And the life that is eternal begins right now, if you are willing to repent and put your faith in Jesus.

This week my life was touched by number of deaths. Pastor Tim Christianson—I’ve known him as long as I’ve been in Northern Virginia—his father slipped on the ice while he was out walking in Minnesota. He died in the emergency room. One of our members, Jayne Dubernas—she will be in our prayers today. Her sister Linda died after a long battle with cancer. Our own Pastor Justin Kumfer is in Saginaw, Michigan for his Aunt Bev’s funeral. And one of the founding members of our congregation, Richard Zuehsow--his mom always visits for Christmas. She tripped in the kitchen and broke both a shoulder and a leg. She died Tuesday on the operating table at Reston Hospital. This is a lot of bad news. But the world is full of bad news. According to my theology, all bad news is the result of sin and sin is the result of evil and we are involved with a continuing battle with evil and all I can say is, “Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!” (Paul’s word from 1 Corinthians 15:57) Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though

they die.” (John 11:25) I need to hear good news like that this week! And I want to share the good news with you.

In the Gospel for today, Jesus comes to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. Baptism is done by physically dipping, pouring, or immersing a person in water. The Bible tells us that all kinds of people were making the five mile trip from Jerusalem to the Jordan River to be baptized by John “for repentance.” John’s baptism was all about turning away from sin and turning toward God. It was about saying, “No!” Saying, No! to every wicked act; No! to every evil thought; No! to every hurtful word; No! to every failure in our love toward God, our neighbors, our family members, even our enemies. When we fail to love God and when we fail to show love and respect to the people that God has put around us in this world—we sin. John’s baptism is about saying, “No!” to sin.

I wonder, “Do people even take sin seriously these days?” I was watching a news report online. It was about a U.S. District Judge down in Giles County, Virginia--He wanted reduce the 10 Commandments from 10 down to 6. Without going into all the details, I found the newscasters comments very interesting. He said, “I wonder what Moses would think about that!” But, wait a minute—Moses didn’t write the 10 Commandments. God did. God is the One up in heaven. God wrote the commandments. It is God we offend when we ignore the commandments, or break the commandments, or reduce the commandments from ten to six to zero. It is God we offend when we fail to love one another as He has loved us. I think for a lot of people the commandments are not all that important. They don’t worry about breaking God’s commandments. God is just “Big Guy” up in heaven who watches out for us and he really doesn’t expect a lot from us in return. As long as we go through some religious motions and try our best then the “Big Guy” up in heaven will keep looking out for us. (At least this is what we tell ourselves.) Let me ask you, “How seriously do

you take God? How seriously do you take His commandments? Do you get alarmed or even afraid when you find yourself breaking one of God’s commandments?” Here’s another question: “How seriously do you take Jesus Christ and the cross he died on for you?” I would suggest that if you don’t take God’s commandments seriously you probably don’t take God’s Son seriously. But that’s a mistake. The Bible says, “The wages of sin is death.” (Romans 6:23)

Jesus came to be baptized by John in the Jordan River. Jesus didn’t have any sin of his own that needed to be washed away. His heart was a heart of love for all people—even his enemies. Jesus didn’t have any repenting to do. So, why did Jesus come to John to be baptized? When John asked Jesus this question, Jesus replied, “Allow me to be baptized now. It is proper to fulfill all righteousness.” (Matthew 3:15) Jesus didn’t need to be baptized. But Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River marked the beginning of his ministry. It was like the ritual washing of the priests. They went through a baptism, a kind of ritual washing, when they were first ordained and consecrated as priests. Jesus was a priest. But his priesthood was different. He did not come to sacrifice animals. Jesus came to sacrifice himself—on a cross—for the sins of the whole world. Paul wrote, “God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21)

This was God’s plan. And so when Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit came down on Him in the form of a dove and God the Father spoke from heaven—“You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:11) Jesus has given us an example to follow. And the good news is that sinners who repent and are baptized, we who believe in Jesus, can be forgiven and receive the free gift of eternal life.