

“The Baptism of Jesus”
Sermon Series on *The King and His Kingdom* #2
Dr. Peter B. Barnes
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(Mt. 3:13-17)

Introduction.

Some of you will remember the name Barbara Streisand. She was a famous singer back in the day, and she also became a film star. I remember her movies and her records, but I didn't know her story. However, I learned more about it recently. She struggled with low self-esteem for most of her life, so it isn't surprising that many of her movies resonated with her life's theme of "I'm not pretty, nobody loves me, and I'm starved for approval."

It is because of this battle with low self-esteem that eventually she stopped doing concert tours altogether. Her most traumatic moment occurred in 1967 in Central Park in NYC when she forgot some lyrics to a song in front of 135,000 people. The shame of that event stuck with her and caused her to stop giving concerts in the 1970s. Finally, after a 30-year absence she did return to singing, but only with a teleprompter so she wouldn't forget the words.

A woman with the talent of Barbara Streisand had a poor self-image, and she thought no one loved her. And one of the events that drove that home was a time when she forgot the words. That phrase intrigues me in light of the passage we've read this morning – she forgot the words. Let me tell you why.

I. The Baptism of Jesus.

I want to set the scene for you. Everyone in Israel is coming out to the Judean countryside to be baptized by John in the Jordan River. People are coming by the throngs, and here comes Jesus to be baptized as well.

In the first century, baptism was a common practice in Judaism. However, it was part of the initiation rite for a Gentile to become a Jew. Jews didn't get baptized, only Gentiles who wanted to convert to Judaism did. If a Gentile wanted to become a Jew, first they offered a sacrifice to the priest which consisted of a heifer and a pair of turtle doves, and these were given as a burnt offering.

Next the Gentile convert was circumcised, and a piece of flesh was cut away from the man's body. (It was for this reason that many Gentiles didn't want to make this ultimate sacrifice to become a Jew, and they became what was known as a "Godfearer." They were Jewish in every other way except circumcision.) The final step in the rite of conversion to Judaism was baptism. After the circumcision

wound healed, the proselyte was then baptized, and this completed the process of conversion.

John the Baptist took this Jewish rite, and he changed it altogether. Instead of asking Gentiles to come and be baptized in order to become Jewish, he asked *Jews* – who already considered themselves to be children of Abraham, recipients of salvation, and part of the covenant community – to be baptized in order to demonstrate their repentance.

Some people were scandalized by it this. Jews being baptized? Whoever heard of anything so foolish?! But others were drawn to it. It's obvious by the response to John's ministry that people had a spiritual hunger, and they were longing for a deeper life with God. So, they came by the hundreds and were baptized by John in the Jordan River seeking a closer relationship with the Lord.

Then Jesus shows up, and He presents Himself to be baptized by John too. This seems a very strange thing for Him to do, and even John protests and says, "*Hey, I'm the one who should be baptized by you, Jesus.*" But Christ insists, and says, "*It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.*" That is an interesting phrase. It means to put everything into right relationship.

This action of Jesus raises a number of questions. If Jesus was the sinless Son of God, then why in the world would He go to the Jordan River to be baptized as a sign of repentance? Did He have sin to repent of? Isn't this sort of like Billy Graham showing up at a revival, and instead of giving the sermon he walks forward at the altar call? What exactly is going on here?

There are a couple of reasons Jesus was baptized. First, it was a moment of ***decision***. For 30 years Jesus had worked as a carpenter in Nazareth, and He waited for a sign from His Heavenly Father that His ministry was supposed to begin. The emergence of John the Baptist in the wilderness calling for repentance was that sign. It was His signal. And Jesus' request to be baptized was also an affirmation of the legitimacy of John's ministry.

A second reason Jesus was baptized is because it was a moment of ***identification***. Jesus didn't need to be baptized and repent of His own sin, but it signified a vicarious confession of sin on behalf of the many who would follow Him later. Just as in the first Exodus the people of Israel had to be consecrated in the wilderness before they entered the Promised Land, so in this "second Exodus" Jesus, the new representative of Israel, consecrated Himself on their behalf out in the wilderness in the Jordan River.

Remember, this is the first thing that Jesus did as a part of His public ministry, and in this act He demonstrates what the Incarnation was all about. It was an act of humility, and He went down with sinful people into the water. Jesus' whole life would be like this.

In his commentary on Matthew, NT scholar Dale Bruner says that it is well known that Jesus ended His career on a cross between thieves, but it deserves to be just as well-known that He began his ministry in a river among penitent sinners. From His baptism to His execution, Jesus stays low, at our level, identifying with us at every point along the way. He became as completely one with us in our humanity as He possibly could, and He knew that one day our sins would be laid on Him at the cross. In effect, this baptism was for our sins in advance.¹

II. The Sign of the Dove.

In verse 16 of our passage we read, *“As soon as Jesus was baptized, He went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on Him.”*

In the OT, the Holy Spirit only came from time to time intermittently. For example, David prayed in the Psalms, *“Lord, do not take your Holy Spirit from me” (Ps. 51:11)*. And we also read about how in the book of Judges Samson didn’t realize that the Holy Spirit had departed from him. But here, the Holy Spirit rests on Jesus, It abides and remains with the Son, in order to equip Jesus for His mission. It would be this same Spirit that would give Jesus the energy, the power and the authority to carry out the work He was sent to do.

In the OT, the prophets had predicted that the long-awaited Messiah would have the anointing of the Spirit of God (Is. 11; 42; and 61). This aerial show of the descent of the dove was intended to tell the whole world that Jesus was everything that was promised and expected in the OT, and He would have the power He needed to carry out His mission.

However, it seems to me that the sign of the Dove is a rather interesting symbol for this occasion to signal the equipping of the Holy Spirit. In some ways we would expect the Holy Spirit to come in a different manner and with a different expression. We might expect another image like a lion or a tiger or an animal of power, for example. Instead the Spirit comes in the form of a dove, a symbol of gentleness and peace. I believe this is a precursor to the way Jesus would be a different kind of Messiah than the one the people were expecting, and His power would be more nuanced and His strength would be modulated. And after all, Isaiah did predict that the Messiah would in fact be the Prince of Peace. So, the symbol of a dove is actually very fitting.

But the most important aspect of the gift of the Holy Spirit at Jesus’ baptism is it was time of empowerment. It isn’t as though the Holy Spirit wasn’t with Jesus up until this point in time in His life. It was, from the moment of His conception. But at Jesus’ baptism the descent of the dove was an outward demonstration that Jesus had been given everything He would need to empower Him for the difficult ministry that lay ahead.

This serves as a reminder to you and me that even the Son of God needed the power of the Holy Spirit to do what God called Him to do. If it was true for Jesus, then how much more is it true for us? The Holy Spirit remains an untapped source for many followers of Christ, and it is to our detriment that we don't draw upon the power of God's Spirit more. It's only as we tap into the power of God that you and I can live the Christian life and experience the transformation we need.

III. The Affirmation of the Father.

Notice the role of the Trinity in the baptism of Jesus. God the Son is there to be baptized. God the Holy Spirit is there and descends like a dove. And God the Father is there and speaks a word of blessing over His Son. The passage reads, "*And a voice from heaven said, 'This is My Son, whom I love, with Him I am well pleased'*" (Mt. 3:17).

God the Father addresses Jesus as His unique and only begotten Son, and He gives Jesus His unqualified divine approval. There is only one other occasion in the entire NT when this happens again, and it's on the Mount of Transfiguration when Jesus is on the final leg of His mission. The Father says this at the beginning of His ministry, and He repeats it again just as Jesus prepares to head toward Jerusalem and the cross.

I'm convinced that the words the Father speaks over Jesus are words every child needs to hear their parent say. And I also believe these words of blessing address each of the most important questions with which we all struggle. I think the biggest questions we ask in life are: Who am I? Am I loved? And am I good at anything? The first is a question of *identity*. The second is a question of *belonging*. And the third is a question of *competence*. And to each of these questions, Jesus hears an unequivocal answer with an affirmation of "yes!" from His Heavenly Father. "*This is My Son, whom I love. With Him I am well pleased.*"

The amazing truth of the gospel is that what God the Father said to Jesus at His baptism He says to you and me today: "This is my child, whom I love. With you I am well pleased." All the kindness heard in the Father's voice for His one and only true Son is conveyed to you and me in our baptism, and when we put our faith in Christ. The words the Father speaks over Jesus are the same words He speaks over you, for when God the Father looks at you He sees you through the lens of Jesus and what He did for you on the cross.

Listen to how the apostle Paul puts it in Galatians – "*For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ*" (Gal. 3:27). All the standing that Jesus had with God is ours simply because of Christ. It isn't because we've done anything. Rather, it's something that has been done for us. God speaks out loud twice in the Gospels, and both times He tells Jesus just how beloved

He is. Have you heard those words from your heavenly Father? Do you know how much He loves you?

I love this idea of being “beloved” by God. In his book, *Hustling God*, my friend Craig Barnes writes: “To be [beloved] is to discover that God cherishes us more deeply than we do ourselves. This love is so strange and overwhelming that it transforms our lives. It leaves us not as different people, but as our true selves.... Thus, to receive God’s blessing is to come to a place we have never been, but where, from the moment we arrive, we know we belong. It is the place where we are unconditionally loved.”²

Once when the Catholic writer Henri Nouwen was preparing to celebrate communion at one of the chapel services at the L’Arche community for disabled adults where he served as chaplain, a woman who was hardly able to speak because of her disability came up to him and said, “Could you give me a blessing?”

Henri replied, “Sure!” and he prepared to offer a formal prayer, lifting his hand and arm which was robed for communion at the time with a long, flowing sleeve.

“No,” she interrupted, “I mean a *real* blessing.”

She wanted a hug! And she wanted Henri to put his whole self into it. Of course he obliged, and he gave her a hug. Then he told her, “You are the beloved of God. And you are very unique.” She smiled from ear to ear.

Immediately another member of the community said, “I want that too!” And soon there were others. Then a twenty-five-year-old man who was an assistant and had come to live and serve in the community after college, came up to Henri. The priest put his arms around the young man and said, “Evan, I’m so happy you’re here. My holding you is God holding you and saying, ‘You are my beloved son.’ Trust that and live your life like that.” Evan’s whole body relaxed. It was as though no one had ever said this to him before.³

Conclusion.

The baptism of Jesus was one of the most significant events in the earthly ministry of our Lord, and it set the stage for all that was to follow. It was a moment of decision and a moment of identification which marked Jesus for the rest of His days, and it helped equip Him for the difficult journey that lay ahead of him. The divine approval Jesus heard from His Heavenly Father must have been music to His ears which He carried with Him for the rest of His life, and it was in the confidence of that relationship of love that He was then able to give Himself completely in sacrifice for others. Have you heard the Father speak words of blessing over you in the past? Or have you forgotten the words, like Barbara Streisand did? Can you hear God say these precious words to you right now?

Several years ago, I was in Anacortes, WA, visiting my friends Bill and Rachel Johnson. Bill used to be a professor at Whitworth University for many years, but he had to take early retirement because he developed Parkinson's disease and eventually it ravaged his body and made it impossible for him to continue. Lorie and I would visit the Johnsons just about every summer for a number of years because their home was such a place of peace and grace and healing for us.

During one of our visits, I was sharing with Bill about a difficult matter with which I was dealing in my life. It involved a problem in a former church I was serving at the time, and I felt misunderstood and that I was being treated unfairly. In some ways I felt like a failure, and it was crippling my soul. Bill listened to me patiently and with such kind attention, and he began to share with me some spiritual insights into my problem and what he thought the Lord was doing through it all.

Then Bill put his hands on both of my shoulders, and he looked me square in the eye. And he smiled and said to me, "Peter, the Lord is so pleased with you." And I began to weep. He repeated the words again. "The Lord is so very pleased with you, Peter." Those were words of blessing I needed to hear in the worst way, and it was healing to my soul to know that regardless of what anyone else might think of me and regardless of how often I might fail, I am beloved by God.

It is interesting to note that God the Father said this to Jesus before He had accomplished anything in His ministry. The affirmation wasn't based upon Jesus' performance. It was born purely out of the Father's deep love for His Son. And the same is true for you and me today. There is nothing you can do to earn these words of affirmation. They are a free gift from the Father.

Listen to me when I say to you this morning: God says, "This is my child, whom I love. With you I am well pleased." Let those words sink into your soul, and repeat them every day in the coming week. May these words be music in your ears, and in the ears of everyone who longs to hear a word of blessing from God. Amen.

¹ F. Dale Bruner, *Matthew, Vol. 1*, p. 82.

² M. Craig Barnes, *Hustling God*, p. 16.

³ Henri Nouwen, *Turn My Mourning Into Dancing*, p. 109.