

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

It must have been quite the scene at the Jordan River. While it is a bit of an overstatement when we hear that *all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to [John] and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan*, the fact is that even if it wasn't every citizen, crowds—and not small crowds—were coming to John. Day after day they were coming to see and hear John. Day after day they heard his call to repentance. Day after day they heard his message of the Messiah who was coming. And they were baptized by him for the forgiveness of sins.

Baptism itself was not something novel to the people of Israel. Remember that the word *baptize* means “to wash with water”. There were ceremonial washings—baptisms, if you will—that occurred regularly. When Gentiles converted to Judaism, they underwent a baptism. A slave could be baptized into freedom, as a testimony to his new life. Baptism didn't free the slave; it only showed that he had been made free. A Gentile's baptism didn't make him Jewish; it only showed that he had chosen to be part of the Jewish faith.

Many think of Christian baptism the same way, that it is just an act of public witness declaring that we have chosen a new way of life. Yet when we think of Baptism as nothing more than a testimony or an act on our part, we miss the wonder in the water! When we see a baptism, it appears to be something very simple. The pastor puts some water on a baby's head, says a few words, and it's all over. But something wonderful happens when that washing with water is done at the command of God and when the powerful Word of God is added to that water. By the power of God's Word, this washing with water becomes a saving bath. Paul says, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: *“But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.”* (Titus 3:4–5, ESV) The wonder in the water is that it truly saves us, making our Baptism one of the greatest gifts that God has given to His children.

The sacrament of Baptism stands at the beginning of the Christian life. It is the door by which we are admitted into God's kingdom and come under His love, protection, and forgiveness. In our epistle lesson, Paul tells us: *“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”* (Romans 6:3–4, ESV) That's the wonder in the water! Baptism unites us with Christ and His saving work for us. It is the covenant in which God offers, and we receive, the benefits of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. God becomes our heavenly Father, and we become His beloved children. Christ died for our forgiveness, and that forgiveness is given to us as we are united with Him in our Baptism. Christ rose to deliver us from death and the devil, and united with Him in our Baptism we rise from the water to have life and salvation forever. Baptism is much more than a mere sign or ceremony. It actually accomplishes a break with the old life of sin, and grants entrance into a new life of fellowship with God.

In Baptism God is at work for us and for our deliverance. That is why it is so sad that many think of Baptism as something we do for God. Many choose to be baptized when they are sure that they believe and want to show their faith before the world and even before God. Baptism is their testimony. But that isn't why the crowds were coming to John. Those multitudes weren't coming out to him to show their faith and demonstrate that they already had the forgiveness of sins. John may have attracted crowds because of his celebrity status. Yes, this strange man in the wilderness, with his poor clothes and strange diet may have

seemed like a strange celebrity, but those who heard him preach were impressed, and they told others and invited others. When people came to John they heard the Word of God, and by the power of the Holy Spirit working in that word the people were moved to repentance.

The Greek word for repentance literally means “to change your mind”. It means turning around to go in the opposite direction. God calls us to change our mind about sin, because sin keeps us from God and His grace. We all know far too well the work of sin in our lives. It gets in the way of our relationships with one another. It causes anger and division. It leads us to think of ourselves, without ever thinking about those around us. Sin also leads only to one place. Jesus says: **“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.”** (Matthew 7:13, ESV) Repentance calls us to change our minds and to go in the opposite direction. It calls us to the mercy and grace that God gives us so freely in Christ.

The crowds were baptized by John in **a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins**. Even in John’s baptism there is a wonder in the water, that here God was forgiving sins. He was revealing His grace. Yet the greater revelation of grace was also manifested. It starts with the simple words: ***In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.*** Jesus didn’t come to John because He needed forgiveness. John knew this, and the other Gospel writers tell us about John’s reluctance to baptize Jesus. But Jesus came to bring the wonder into the water. He came from heaven to take into Himself our flesh so that He could give Himself as a substitute for sinners. He, who had no sin, was baptized to take His place beside us. The voice from heaven attests to the fact that this is God’s plan: **“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”**

In taking our sin into Himself, Jesus washes away the guilt, shame and punishment that we deserve. He deals with our sin on the cross, suffering and dying for us that we may be free. He rises again to free us from death and from the torment of hell that we deserve. He covers us with His righteousness, and gives us His Spirit. As Jesus came out of the water, ***he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.*** Now Jesus gives us that Spirit in our Baptism. The Holy Spirit brings us the faith we need to see the wonder in the water. He strengthens our faith in the dying and rising Saviour. He assures us that we are the beloved, redeemed and blessed children of God.

A man went to his pastor and said that he didn't understand why Baptism was so important—after all, how could a few drops of water make a difference. The pastor listened, and then wrote a cheque for \$10,000.00, and gave it to the man. "I want you to go to the bank and cash it and you will understand how baptism can make a difference", the pastor said. The man took the cheque and looked at it. "But you didn't sign it", he told the pastor. "Oh, that's all right", the pastor said, "After all, what difference can a few drops of ink make!" Just like a signature on a cheque, the waters of Baptism make a difference! And yet the water is just water. It comes out of the tap, just like the water we use to do dishes or the water we drink. But when you add the word and promises of God, then that water can do great things. In the catechism Luther asks: ***“How can water do such great things?”*** The answer is so simple: ***Certainly not just water, but the word of God in and with the water does these things, along with the faith which trusts this word of God in the water. For without God’s word the water is plain water and no Baptism. But with the word of God it is a Baptism, that is, a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit.*** (SC, Baptism III)

Yes, there is wonder in the water. Take simple water, add the Word and promise of God to it, and that water becomes a Baptism. The Living Word, Jesus Christ, joins us to Himself in Baptism. God’s powerful Word—the same Word that was spoken when God said: **“Let there be light,” and there was light”** (Genesis 1:3, ESV) is at work in our Baptism. This is no mere rite; no mere act of testimony on our part. Yes, our Baptism does testify, but it testifies to the wonder of God’s love and grace, as He works to bless us through our Baptism. Amen.