

*“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:

I know it probably never sits in your pocket or your wallet long enough, but have you ever really looked at your money? I’m sure that most of you would recognize the different denominations of currency by their colour—you can quickly tell the difference between a 5, 10, 20 and that rare 50, unless, of course, you are colour blind. But do you know your money well enough to be able to spot a counterfeit bill? There have always been ways of recognizing a genuine bill as opposed to a counterfeit note. Of course, advances in technology often made it easier for the counterfeiters, meaning that governments had to keep coming up with new ways to prevent counterfeiting. Banks and retailers use scanners designed to identify special marks and imprints on the paper, because these marks cannot be photocopied. There are other marks, too—such as raised printing in certain areas and hidden holographic images that will not copy, and which can only be seen when you look at the money in a certain way. Other countries have adopted even more elaborate anti-counterfeiting efforts.

At one time, one of the simplest and surest ways of identifying a genuine bank note from a fake involved the watermark on the paper. You can still see this mark on fine papers today, although it is much rarer than it used to be. The watermark, which involved an elaborate engraving process that was not easily duplicated, identified the source of the paper, and since only special paper was used for bank notes, this mark identified the genuine from the fake.

You, too, have a watermark. In Baptism, God marks us as His children, identifying us as genuine saints in His kingdom. We can be sure of our identity, and sure that we have a real, not counterfeit grace given to us when that watermark of faith and life is placed upon us. We are made new creations, imprinted with the forgiveness and the new life that God Himself bestows upon us through the Saviour, Jesus Christ, who is watermarked at His baptism as our true and only Redeemer.

The baptism of our Lord is such an important event that all of the Gospel writers take note of it. John the Baptist—called that because he preached and practised a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins—was doing what God had called him to do: he was preparing the way for the Messiah who would come. John knew that God’s plan of salvation was nearing its high point. As he preached, John told the people: *“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.”* Baptism existed before John. According to Jewish usage, to baptize someone “into the name of someone or something” meant that you received baptism in order to enter that new state or condition offered. Thus, a slave when freed, would be baptized “into the name of freedom”, and his baptism marked a break with slavery and his entrance into a new kind of life which had freedom as its characteristic. That is the idea behind John’s baptism. John baptized people into and for repentance, so that they lived in that repentant life. This is also why John refused to baptize the Pharisees and the Sadducees who came to the Jordan. He said to them: *“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.”* (Matthew 3:7-9, ESV)

Now a totally different situation confronts John. Jesus comes to the Jordan. Our text is rather blunt and to the fact, as Mark so often is in his accounts in the Gospel. Matthew tells us that John is surprised to see the holy, sinless, eternal Son come to be baptized, along with the others who needed this baptism. Remember that John wouldn’t baptize the Pharisees and Sadducees because they wouldn’t repent. Now he is confronted with the exact opposite situation. John sees no reason to baptize Jesus, for John knows Jesus has no sin of which to repent. While Mark does not tell us of the conversation between them, Matthew does tell us that *“John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’”* (Matthew 3:14,

ESV) John must have been even more surprised when Jesus said: ***“Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.”*** (Matthew 3:15, ESV)

One of the reasons why the church always takes time to remember this event is the important reality that lies behind this statement of our Saviour. He does not come to the Jordan because of His need of righteousness. No, He comes to take His place with all of sinful humanity that He might bring His righteousness to all of sinful mankind. He comes as one of us, ready to face the judgement that our sin deserves before the perfect righteousness of God. He comes to be water-marked to be the engraving plate, if you will, of all those who will come after Him.

As Jesus comes out of the water, the Father makes it very clear that Jesus is the genuine article, that He is the Christ, the One who is anointed or set apart to be the Saviour of all the world. What wonderful signs the Father gives! Mark tells us: ***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.”*** John the Baptist will later tell his disciples the significance of this when he says: ***“I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”*** (John 1:33–34, ESV)

Marked with water and the Holy Spirit, Jesus comes to take our place under the law of God. He comes to live the holy, righteous life we have never been able to live. He comes to bring us the forgiveness that we could never earn by ourselves. In His Baptism, Jesus sets the pattern or established the engraving plates that will be used to mark each of us. He comes to bring something new and wonderful to our lives. He comes to bring us a Baptism greater than that of John. God works a great miracle when the water, connected and empowered by the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, is poured upon us in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in our Baptism. Paul tells us in our epistle lesson: ***“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) We die to the old life of sin and death that was our human nature. And through the grace, power and mercy of God we are also resurrected to a new life in which we can claim something new and wonderful, for we have been watermarked, marked as the redeemed and forgiven children of God. God speaks through this blessed Sacrament and says to us: ***“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”***

In His Baptism, Jesus was marked as the One who would bring poor, miserable, hopeless and dying creatures like you and me the blessings of life and forgiveness. He comes out of the water, and begins a journey that none of us could endure—the journey that leads to the cross. He leaves the Jordan behind, and goes to call people out of the darkness of sin and death into His wonderful life. He goes to the cross where He will die for us, and comes forth from the tomb that could not hold Him in death. Now, marked in Him, we follow His pattern. We don’t leave our Baptism behind—we actually take it with us each day. It is the mark of our identity; it shows that we are truly the children of God and heirs of eternal life. It shows that we belong to the God of grace and glory, who has created us, redeemed us and set us apart as His holy people. And the proof of that should be visible to everyone. Paul reminds us: ***“and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.”*** (2 Corinthians 5:15, ESV) As the baptized children of God, we show the marks of Christ imprinted on us. We love, as He loved us. We forgive, as we have been forgiven in Christ. We care, we encourage, we help and serve as Christ Himself did all those things for us. When people look at us, they should be able to see the mark of Christ on us—and know by our words, our actions and our attitudes that we are the genuine article: we are the people of God, through faith in Christ, the Christ who has marked us as His own in our Baptism. The women of our Lutheran Women’s Missionary League seem to understand that. It is the message that comes from their league pledge. Watermarked into Christ in our Baptism, we live in and for Christ. I invite you to join in saying the LWML league pledge with me today:

In fervent gratitude for the Saviour's dying love and His blood-bought gift of redemption, we dedicate ourselves to Him with all that we are and have; and in obedience to His call for workers in the harvest fields, we pledge Him our willing service wherever and whenever He has need of us.

We consecrate to our Saviour our hands to work for Him, our feet to go on His errands, our voice to sing His praises, our lips to proclaim His redeeming love, our silver and our gold to extend His kingdom, our will to do His Will, and every power of our life to the great task of bringing the lost and erring into eternal fellowship with Him. Amen.