

# The baptism of Jesus

We all know about beginnings: that first day in school, becoming old enough to join the youth group at church, going off to college, starting a new job or career, marriage. You



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may remember the exact moment you accepted Christ as Savior and the day you publicly declared your life commitment by baptism. The key to “firsts” is the knowledge they are not a standalone event but a beginning of something new. In the instance of your baptism, you are declaring that life will now be a journey of growing in faith and helping others experience God’s grace in Christ.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all recount the baptism of Jesus, but only Luke connects this event with Herod Antipas’ decision to put John the baptizer in prison. Matthew and Mark tell us about Herod’s killing of John. Perhaps Luke was making sure the following generations would understand that following Christ in baptism signals a life that will not always be easy and can be very dangerous.

It is perfectly clear that Jesus has come to us to open our eyes and heart to a life that involves changing the world. John boldly announces that this Messiah will “baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16) — see the fulfillment in Acts 2 and following. He describes Jesus as harvesting humanity for God, sifting the wheat from the husks and bringing the separated grain into the barn and burning the useless husks (v.17). In that day farmers simply scooped up the harvested grain, tossed it into the air and let the wind blow away the lighter husks or chaff.

John’s language was always plain and intense. The crowds knew exactly what he was saying. You might see in this the image of a fiery evangelist from an earlier generation of our world calling people to “believe or burn in a devil’s hell!” A study of John’s ministry will show he was critical of the religious establishment (Matthew 3:5-10). Do not make the mistake of seeing John as only harsh or negative. John appealed to

the common people, “proclaiming good news” (v. 18). Judaism had become bound up with religious rituals and so many rules that ordinary people were pushed to the edge of their faith traditions. “Good news” means “the gospel” to us, but to John’s hearers it meant God really cared about them, an idea buried in the structures of the powerful and wealthy class. People flocked to hear John and be baptized in anticipation of the coming Messiah and a transformed world.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all recount the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River, specifying Jesus heard a voice from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness.” “The Holy Spirit came down on him in bodily form like a dove” (v. 22). This baptism marks a clear turning in the saga of redemption.

People expected a prophet like Elijah to precede the Messiah. It was natural to identify John as the announcing voice because of his appearance and speech. But some wondered if John were the Messiah. John firmly ended any such speculation: “I baptize you with water, but the one who is more powerful than me is coming. I’m not worthy to loosen the strap of his sandals” (v. 16). Only the lowest ranking household servant or slave was assigned the job of removing a guests sandals and washing the feet.

John prepares the way for Jesus then, in the crowning point of his ministry, baptizes Jesus. But this baptism is different from John’s usual ministry because Jesus does not need to repent of any sin and Jesus is not being initiated as a disciple of John. There may have been some debate about this matter (Jesus, sin and his relationship to God) because Matthew 3:13 has John protesting that he is not worthy to baptize Jesus, that instead, Jesus should baptize him. John had been preaching about six months when Jesus came to him at the Jordan River.

This became Jesus’ public affirmation that John was the “announcing” voice appointed by God (Luke 20:3-7). This is also the moment Jesus identified himself with all of us as sinners in need of God’s forgiveness and love (Luke 15:1). The simplest reason for

## Formations

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Scripture: Luke 3:15-22

Jesus’ baptism is a public declaration that the Savior has come, that all the history, laws, rituals and prophecies have reached their conclusion in Jesus, the Christ. This is Jesus’ first step on the road to the cross!

Everything about John was radical. His preaching infuriated the religious leaders. Baptism was a rite reserved for sinful Gentiles who converted to Judaism, not for God’s “chosen.” Yet crowds flocked to John because he pointed beyond tradition and legalism to the God who cares about people and offers hope beyond this world’s inequality and suffering.

Christian baptism is not a way to wash away our sins, but a testimony that by our faith in Christ God has already forgiven and accepted us as his own dear children. The idea that a person must be old enough to understand their need for God informs the idea of baptizing by the person’s consent instead of by parental or institutional consent. Faith is personal and your relationship to God involves a lifetime of growing in faith and a deepening of your relationship with God.

We are committed (baptized) into a life of serving God and the world around us. While Jesus was preaching about our need for God and how we should care for the poor and suffering, he was on the way to the cross. Salvation is that “first” that should shape everything else about your life. Each life is different in circumstances, challenges and serving God. John the baptizer had a specific calling, to announce the Christ. Reread the words of John’s father, Zechariah, as he sings that John will “tell his people how to be saved through the forgiveness of their sins” and “give light to those who are sitting in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide us on the path of peace” (Luke 1:77, 79). When you trust in God your life should become an expression of God’s compassion in words and actions.

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