**Mark 1:4-11**

**4**  John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **5** 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. **6** Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. **7** 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. **8**  I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” **9**  In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. **10** 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. **11** And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

**“The New Way Opened”**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen. Christmas we know is a celebration from the earliest times by Christians. However, many pass over or have no clue that the season of Epiphany is actually older. How can this be you might ask? While the conception and birth of Jesus reflects the Father’s love of sending His Son. Epiphany is all about manifesting or revealing Jesus to be true God and man able to save sinners. This light first comes with the arrival of the Wisemen that kicked off the season last week on January 6th. The light of Christ will grow, but the first Sunday after the Epiphany always lets us begin with the baptism of our Lord.

John baptizing at the Jordan River marked an old way of life. Many had long forgotten about it, but this river played a big part in the past. After much wandering in the wilderness, Moses before death could look upon the Promised Land beyond the Jordan. As God gave deliverance from Egypt by the Red Seas, so God gave a victorious entrance to Joshua and Israel against their enemies by crossing the Jordan River. Likewise, it was at these waters where Elisha saw the departure of the prophet Elijah taken up into heaven by chariots of fire. By the time John baptized, all this glory was but a glimmer. Yet, one last brilliant light would shine forth from the Jordan. These waters would welcome the Son of God, the promised Savior. Jesus opens a new way of life for all by baptism into His Name that will not fail.

There was plenty of baptizing going on by John. Everyone was coming out to confess his or her sins. It was not a glorious way for anyone to face these waters. Whether great or small all were sinners in the sight of God. This is what John preached, “…a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Sure and certain judgment mucked up the waters by washing away sin with the promise of God’s Word. Lives were changed, but heaven gave no response to such redeeming work. It is why the Son of God stepped into the water for His baptism. Just as the baptized no longer have their own identity, so Christ held back His greatness as God to stand in the place muddied by sinners. Yet, the difference was that after baptism heaven opened to Him without hesitation.

The way that heaven opens for us is alone in Jesus. It means nothing is more important than our baptism. Some want to view this gift of grace to be an option as if nothing is lost. Christ responds, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16). Where else does Jesus make himself real to sinners than in baptism? How else do we know heaven is open? Luther says, “Therefore, it makes sense that whoever rejects Baptism rejects God’s Word, faith, and Christ, who directs us to Baptism and binds us to Baptism” (Concordia 610:30). To rely on your baptism is better than faith because how quickly does faith falter and stumble! Yet, heaven remains open for you by what Jesus had done by baptism. It is the most certain of gifts that stand when other ways fall. Church services began not by saying, “I believe” but rather “In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” God by our Baptism invites us again to repent and believe in the Gospel.

There was more than heaven opening after the baptism of Jesus. The Spirit descended upon him like a dove. Where God gave His Spirit to prophets, kings, and priests, it was never a permanent residence. John the baptizer was promised to “be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb” (Luke 1:15). He still had limits compared to the Savior saying, “I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” This was not a different baptism from what was already present by water and the Word. It meant Jesus had the authority to make baptism effective and meaningful to sinners. Since the Holy Spirit was already present at His conception, the Spirit now at baptism came to anoint Jesus to carry out redemption as the true prophet, priest, and king. Those washed clean by God’s Word were looking forward to what God was going to do in the promised Messiah.

The way that God’s Spirit comes to us is from Christ. This is our gift of life by baptism. Some will question you over what God has done emphasizing the need to make the right decision for Jesus. Since no one else created the world from nothing, but God and His Word, so baptism is a world of new life that follows the same course with God. We died with Christ with nothing of our will, work, or ways with life created only by the power of His Word. Seeking baptisms based on a work of man mocks what is to be one baptism that makes the difference. Others also focus on the moment of baptism as if the past has no weight for the present. If Christ has put our mucked up lives on Him, then His perfect life He puts on us. It means the Spirit of God fights for us, in us, and with us against Satan, our sinful nature, and the world’s deception. Everything God gave Christ is now ours, even the right to pray, “Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy Name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done.”

There is a ordered response to Jesus’ baptism. First heaven opened to the God of salvation, and then the Spirit rested on the Son without limit, but above all the Father spoke His final word. The voice from heaven said, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” The Father gives total approval and it is the highest answer to hear. The Word from eternity is the Word become flesh. Christ was always beloved by the Father, but at His baptism unique love poured out over how He would save a sinful world. Baptism bound Jesus to the cross. Healing the sick, casting out demons, beating Satan’s temptation was the goodness of God revealed in Christ, but the glory was to be in His sacrifice. The Father was “well pleased” with Him for all evil, death, and judgment did not have the last say. Jesus never hid such good news saying, “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again” (John 10:17).

The way that our Father finds pleasure in us is by Christ. Where the Law accuses us of sin calling for repentance, the Gospel raises us up with Christ as His brothers and sister to hear, “with you I am well pleased.” God chooses to forgive every thought, word, and deed because Christ covers all by His perfect sacrifice. The voice of our Father is what encourages the baptized to make the sign of the cross upon our lives. Baptism has bound us to the crucified and living savior. He felt suffering and death in our place, so we can feel peace and life in His Name that has no end. St. Paul says, “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” There is no need to justify our insecure ways as sinners. To stand in them is to miss Christ who made a way of forgiveness for us. He gives His sacrifice as the answer of love to lift up our hearts and change lives to trust in Him.

The Jordan River played a part one last time with the baptism of Christ. Now He has made all water precious when God’s Word comes to it. Crossing over to the Promised Land is to have life in God’s Son. The doors of heaven He has opened. The Spirit of truth He sends by His Word. The Father is well pleased for He left none out of His sacrifice. Jesus opens a new way of life for all by baptism into His Name that will not fail. Amen. Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, be with your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting. Amen.