

## **Introductory**

This text has parallels in the other three Evangelists. In the TLH one-year lectionary, the Magi (Matthew 2: 1-12) is appointed to be read on the First Sunday after Epiphany, and John's account of the Baptizer (1: 19-28) is the reading for Advent 4. In LW and LSB, the Matthew, Mark, and Luke accounts of John baptizing Jesus are appointed for in Series A, B, and C, respectively.

LSB makes The Baptizer more prominent than it had been during the Advent Season all three years, and the focus during that season is on the coming of the Christ. Now, during the Epiphany Season, beginning with this Baptism of Jesus, the focus is on the Christ Who is here and the revelation of Jesus as that Christ and God. And we will be looking at a lot of miracles coming up.

You can make a case for the opening of John's Gospel being his birth narrative, but such a case cannot be made for Mark. Skipping right over the birth, circumcision, presentation, and boy in the Temple, and all the rest from Matthew and Luke, he moves right to Jesus the Son of God, written about by Isaiah. Actually, he moves to John, also written about by Isaiah. Jesus will come soon.

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I will be talking about Baptism on Sunday, beginning with pagan washings, and ending with Christian Baptism and how much in between to be determined. Whenever I get the chance, I make sure to define the word "to baptize – βαπτίζω," the general term for "to wash." People hear all the time that the word means "to immerse," but it doesn't. It's a general term for "washing."

How do you wash your car? How do you wash your clothes? How do you wash your dishes? See how I used the same word – wash – to refer to brushing and spraying your car, probably immersing your clothes, and – you don't have to immerse your plates, and you can wipe and rinse your silverware as well. Wash your driveway, your mask, your glasses, and on and on and on.

The Lutherans like their "proof texts," so begin with Mark 7:4, the one in the back of the Catechism. There, the word "βαπτίζω – to wash," is used to refer to the washing of "cups, pots," things made from copper and beds. One of the operative words there is "κλίνη – bed," and no matter what the translations call it, see the nine NT occurrences of the word – it means bed.

The chair is a relatively modern invention, but the bed has been around for a long time. The two considerations for a good bed have always been to make a comfortable surface to lay on and to get it up off of the ground, avoiding things like a draft and especially vermin. To be sure, like now, there was a wide variety of bed, but often the ancients would need steps or a ladder to get into bed.

So, you're not going to immerse that to clean it, and even the more portable beds in the NT are still beds. You don't immerse your bed, and you may or may not immerse "things made from copper," my translation. Copper things would have included anything from various utensils to large containers like the one used at the wedding at Cana when Jesus changed water to wine.

The other proof text, the one not in the Catechism, is from Luke (11:38), where the Pharisees were gob smacked that Jesus did not – the verb is βαπτίζω – before He dined. The Pharisees did not expect Jesus to immerse Himself before dinner. How would He have even done that? If I told you to immerse yourself, where would you do that at your home? Sure, if you had a swimming pool.

I suppose you could immerse yourself in the bathtub, depending on how big you and your bathtub are. The Pharisees did wonder why He skipped the ritual of washing of His hands before the meal. The Jews knew about that and washing your hands after you use the bathroom and the like. Most likely there was a pot filled with water. Probably He dipped His hand, but not His whole self.

As with the American language, there are words in the Greek language for more specific kinds of washing. In his An Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words, W.E. Vine lists seven, besides "βαπτίζω." I have the book, you can download it at <https://www.pdfdrive.com/download-vines-expository-dictionary-of-old-and-new-testament-words-e45682575.html> or there's an app for that.

One of those more specific words for washing is "βάπτω – to dip." It occurs four times in the NT, and each time clearly means just that, or "to immerse." The word is actually the root for "βαπτίζω," which means – it means that they are related, but far from making the case that βαπτίζω means "to immerse," because the word "βάπτω – to dip," is not used for Baptism, it does just the opposite.

To put it another way, if the Bible writers had wanted to tell us that we should use immersion – to dip - for Baptism, they could have, but they chose not to. In fact, by rejecting "βάπτω – to dip," and using the more general "βαπτίζω – to wash," they de-emphasize the mode of washing; you can go ahead and immerse, or sprinkle, or pour – the mode of applying the water is unimportant.

While at the same elevating the importance of the Word used with that water, which is what Luther is talking about when he asks, and then answers the question "What is Baptism?" This Sunday, we see that the same Word which was used to create light out of darkness has the power to make that water – however applied – all that it is. And Paul seems to think something is going on there.

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## Textual Notes

4. Mark tells us that "ἐγένετο Ἰωάννης ὁ βαπτίζων – John the Baptizer came." There is no great fanfare, and the very common verb used to describe his appearance occurs six hundred seventy-one times in the NT. He is identified with a present participle, and the tense causes us to focus on the connection between the action and the person doing the act. He is called "The Baptizer."

John almost certainly grew up in Hebron, and Jerusalem was familiar to him, and that's where all the action was, and yet we find him located “ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ – in the country,” The actual location in the country – said by John A (1:28) to be “Βηθανία...πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου – Bethany beyond the Jordan” – can be found on Google Maps by typing “The Baptismal Site” into the search box.

Click on Google Earth and you will see that this place is out in the country, and it's also a desert. The location is in modern Jordan, and at this time it is open to visitors. It is the #2 rated Dead Sea Attraction on TripAdvisor, right behind the Mujib Nature Reserve, and right ahead of Kerak Castle. The place is sacred also to Jews, called in Hebrew “Bethabara – place of crossing.”

It is thought by many to be the place (Joshua 3:15, 16), and it is at least near to the place, where Israel crossed the Jordan to enter the Promised Land. From here Elijah was taken to heaven. John A relates (10:40) how Jesus returned to that place during His Ministry, and that there were believers there, and they confessed that the things John B had said about Jesus were true.

If you click further on “images,” you can see photos of the Jordan River. As one who almost daily traverses the Mississippi, I can tell you that the Jordan is small for a river. It's more than a stream, it's a river, but it's a small river. In the time of Jesus, before modern irrigation captured water upstream, it would have been a larger river. Not Mississippi large, but larger than now.

At that location, John is “κηρύσσων βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν – preaching a baptism into the forgiveness of sins.” Baptisms – washing with water, are no great shakes. Pagan religions often included ritual washing, often as part of an initiation ceremony, as do modern religions like the LDS, JW, and Wicca. But none of those baptisms meant what John's meant.

So, just what did John's baptism mean? The pagans washed because they knew about sin, they knew that they were dirty and in need of cleansing, but the sin never rubbed off. Gentiles underwent proselyte baptism into Judaism because they had to wipe off the filth of not being born that race. John connected his baptism to things like confession, repentance, and forgiveness.

Later on, in Acts, Luke relates how Paul ran into some “disciples,” and he asked them if they had yet received “the Holy Spirit.” They replied, “No, we have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit,” and Paul said, “Into what then were you baptized,” and they said, “Into John's Baptism,” and Paul says there's your problem. You have received John's Baptism, not Trinitarian Baptism.

Paul explains, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is Jesus.” When they heard that “they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus,” which is that Trinitarian (Christian) Baptism. John's baptism was more than just washing with water, and it was connected to belief as well, but it doesn't really do anything.

But we're getting there, by connecting the water to those spiritual, meaningful things. The Baptism left by Jesus carried the power and authority of the Triune God, and it actually does things. Look

in the back of the Catechism under “How can water do such great things” to see what some of those things are. Sometimes we complicate the simple. Maybe reference Romans 6 in the sermon.

5. John is located out in the middle of nowhere, and “ξεπορεύετο πρὸς αὐτὸν πᾶσα ἡ Ἰουδαία χώρα καὶ οἱ Ἱεροσολυμεῖται πάντες – they were going (coming) out to him all the region of Judea and all Jerusalem.” Check out the Internet to see a map of the Roman Province of Judea. <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-l-d&q=roman+province+of+judea>

But the word “Province - ἐπαρχίας” is not the word used here. That word is used in Acts 23:34 and 25:1\*. The term used here is less specific, like saying “around Iowa” rather than “in the state of Iowa.” The upshot is that some of these people were traveling distance to see and hear John. There were also city folk from Jerusalem, and others tell us that the religious leaders came out.

The reason for journeying, “καὶ ἐβαπτίζοντο ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ Ἰορδάνῃ ποταμῷ ἐξομολογούμενοι τὰς ἁμαρτίας αὐτῶν – and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.” Confession is an OT concept that had fallen into disuse. It’s a lot easier to confess your sins when you know about forgiveness, and Mark has told us that they knew about forgiveness.

Compare and contrast that to all other religions, none of which know much about forgiveness, all of whom have various way to deal with the problem of sin and an angry God that do not involve forgiveness. Many of the ancients offered things, including humans, to seek to assuage the anger. More modern religions put forth laws, which when they are obeyed make God less angry.

6. The clothing and diet of John are noteworthy. We know that because Mark notes them, telling us that he was clothed “τρίχας καμήλου καὶ ζώνην δερματίνην περὶ τὴν ὀσφὺν αὐτοῦ – in the hair of a camel, and a belt of leather around his waist.” Some of the commentators find meaning in the rough, camel hair clothing, said to be favored by OT prophets, and it was.

*Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges* says,

He recalled the asceticism of the Essene. His raiment was of the coarsest texture, such as was worn by Elijah ([2 Kings 1:8](#)) and the prophets generally ([Zechariah 13:4](#)). His girdle, an ornament often of the greatest richness in Oriental costume and of the finest linen ([Jeremiah 13:1](#); [Ezekiel 16:10](#)) or cotton or embroidered with silver and gold ([Daniel 10:5](#); [Revelation 1:13](#); [Revelation 15:6](#)), was of untanned leather ([2 Kings 1:8](#)), like that worn by the Bedouin of the present day.

About his food, they say,

His diet was the plainest and simplest. Locusts were permitted as an article of food ([Leviticus 11:21-22](#)). Sometimes they were ground and pounded, and then mixed with flour and water and made into cakes; sometimes they were salted and then eaten. For wild honey comp. the story of Jonathan, [1 Samuel 14:25-](#)

John is of the Priestly class, but he doesn't live in Hebron and commute to Jerusalem like the rest of them. He chooses instead to go off the grid and live off the fat of the land, a thing not unheard of for prophets of God, while preaching Jesus the Christ. By disconnecting himself from Jerusalem, and notably from Temple, he's distancing himself from all that. Jesus will do the same.

You hear about how John probably – almost certainly – belonged to the Essenes, but I don't think so. If you look at John, and then look at the Essenes, they look very different. The NT is very clear that John was off the grid, in the place where Isaiah said he would be, and so were the Essenes. Sure, the Essenes were also out in the country, but they were in the city as well.

Which is to say that just because both John and the Essenes could be found out in the country does not make John one of them. We live out in the country, and we are surrounded by ELCA churches, but we are not one of them. Besides that, I have not seen a lot of evidence that John was a part of the Essenes. We shop with ELCA people and see them at the library, but we are not one of them.

7. Up to this point, Mark has described – among other things – the preaching of John, and now he quotes John, “καὶ ἐκήρυσσεν λέγων Ἐρχεται ὁ ἰσχυρότερός μου ὀπίσω μου – and John was preaching, saying, ‘He comes who is stronger than I after me.’” We don't use the word “mighty” when we want to talk about a strong person. We use the word “strong.” Use that word.

The word means physical strength, the opposite of physical weakness. It could mean that Jesus has larger muscles than John, and who would deny that Jesus was buff, but probably that's not what John is talking about. He's talking about Jesus, who is able to do the miracles he is never said to do. And the Words of Jesus soar to a different level when compared to John's preaching.

Last week, we looked at Jesus in Temple teaching the theologians, and that was quite a feat, and He was only twelve! I quoted from Al Schmidt, “Few if any, would dispute that Jesus was the greatest teacher the world has ever known. He employed words, parables, and human-life illustrations that stirred both friend and foe.” John was a great preacher, but he wasn't Jesus.

Schmidt then Quotes from Mark, who says that when He spoke “people were amazed at His teaching, because He taught them as one who had authority” – not like Scribes Pharisees. Then I talked about how education is important to the Christian religion, to other religions not so much. That text will come up again in not quite a year, and the book is *Under the Influence*.

8. But more to the point that Mark has John making; comparing and contrasting his baptism to the Baptism of Jesus, “ἐγὼ ἐβάπτισα ὑμᾶς ὕδατι, αὐτὸς δὲ βαπτίσει ὑμᾶς Πνεύματι Ἁγίῳ – I baptized you (pl) with water, He will Baptize you (pl) with the Holy Spirit.” Note the tenses; John baptized – past tense, and Jesus will baptize – future tense. There's an apocalyptic ring to those tenses.

That's another major difference between John and Jesus. The inventing of a Sacrament is above John's pay grade, and he is utterly unable and unauthorized to do that. Jesus, on the other hand, is

both able and authorized to do that, and He does. Twice. Maybe three times, depending on which of the Lutheran Confessions you're reading, and I'm good with that. Either way.

The Baptism invented by Jesus, the one John here describes, will include the giving of the Holy Spirit – that's sort of a big deal, and the other writers include “with fire,” which in the Bible means judgment or purification – here I'm going with purification. This is the fundamental area where Jesus is “stronger” than John, and the one that he mentions here in his preaching.

9. By and by, Jesus came over, and “καὶ ἐβαπτίσθη εἰς τὸν Ἰορδάνην ὑπὸ Ἰωάννου – and was baptized in the Jordan by John,” and that ought to strike us as just a little bit odd. Jesus is not a sinner, so what's the point? Matthew tells us that John also thought it a little bit odd, and he said as much to Jesus, who told John why it was like that, and John went ahead and baptized Jesus.

Besides that, perhaps the point of it can be seen by asking what would have happened had Jesus not been baptized like this. Perhaps that's the wrong question. This had to happen in order for the work Jesus came to do to be done. We have noted previously what follows this in the synoptics; Jesus is led out into the wilderness to begin fighting with Satan, and He wins that fight.

His work culminates with Holy Week, where He again proves victorious on Easter Sunday, and His time on the planet is capped with the glorious Ascension into heaven. The NT also makes it clear that the timing of all this is not willy-nilly, but in “the fullness of time” the Father sent the Son, who several times says “my time is not yet come” and then “my time is come.”

10. Mark next has Jesus “ἀναβαίνων ἐκ τοῦ ὕδατος – coming up from the water.” This does not say that Jesus was immersed, but that He was in the water to be baptized, and then He came out of the water, which would be the natural way for those things to progress. Whether or not He was immersed when in the water is not clear, and ultimately neither is it important.

If we're talking about a Mikveh, and we probably are, where it is very important that the entirety of human flesh be completely covered by water, then He was. If we're talking about a Mikveh. It's an important point to those who add laws to the Bible and who insist on total immersion for Christian Baptism, but it's not important, and what does this prove anyway?

If Jesus was immersed, then what does that say for Christian Baptism, which is in many ways new and different from John's Baptism. If John baptized by immersion, so what? Jesus' command was to go and baptize, and that word means to cleanse with water in a very general way, including immersion, sprinkling, wiping, et al. The word “baptize” means the same throughout the NT.

What *is* important is that “εἶδεν σχιζομένους τοὺς οὐρανοὺς – they saw the heavens splitting apart.” The word for “splitting” is the reason why schizophrenia is called what it is. If you look at the eleven occurrences in the NT, you will see that the word means a cataclysmic event, seen by all, with connotations of the supernatural, like when the Temple curtain split on Good Friday.

To add to the cataclysm, “καὶ τὸ Πνεῦμα ὡς περιστερὰν καταβαῖνον εἰς αὐτόν – and the Spirit like a dove is descending onto Him.” These things were not done in secret, but they were out there for all to see. Nor are the Sacraments, whereby God miraculously takes water and makes Baptism, and He takes bread and wine and makes the Sacrament of the Altar, done in secret, but in the open.

**11.** That’s the visual, what was seen. Add to the visual this audio, “καὶ φωνὴ ἐγένετο ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν – a voice came out of the heavens.” First, the heavens split open, then the dove, and now the voice, and it says to Jesus, “Σὺ εἶ ὁ Υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν σοὶ εὐδόκησα – you are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased,” and that’s the only time the Father says that.

Three times in the NT we hear the Father speaking from the sky about the Son. Here, at the Transfiguration, where He says very similar words, and as recorded by John (12:28). The Son asks the Father to glorify His (the Father’s) name, and the voice says “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again,” a reference to not just the Resurrection, but to all of Holy Week.

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