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“Take Me To The River”

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Baptism of Jesus, Mark 2

"Take Me To The River" was a huge R&B hit back in 1974, written and recorded by the great Rev. Al Green. Then, in 1979, the Talking Heads did an alternative rock version that topped the charts again. “Take Me To The River” has been recorded by dozens of stars, including Foghat, Bryan Ferry, Tina Turner, the Grateful Dead, The Commitments, Phish, Tom Jones, and Bruce Springsteen.

Now, unlike Pastor Lew with his recent Johnny Cash impersonation, I’m not going to sing this song for you today. But I am going to take you to the river today. I am not going to personally dip you in the water, wash you down, cleanse your soul, and put your feet on the ground. But I am going to tell you how you can start fresh with God, how to get right with God, how to redefine your relationship with God. Because every single Christian needs that. Whether you’re a kid, or an old geezer. Whether you’re a brand-new believer, or a life-long Lutheran. Whether you’re male, female, married, single, black, white, Asian, Latino, Democrat, Republican, Hope member, visitor – or whoever you are – every single one of us needs to say, or sing, in our hearts today to the Lord, “Take me to the river.”

Today’s Bible story takes place at a river. More accurately, in a river. John the Baptist is standing in the Jordan River. He’s preaching fire and brimstone. He’s laying into the people. He’s exposing their foibles, and laying bare their hypocrisies. John is one harsh, severe dude. But God is using John’s river ministry to move people’s hearts. There are crowds of people who are saying, “Take me to the river.” They’re waiting in line to be baptized by John.

These people, you see, are Israelites. They are familiar with the Law of God, and the Prophets of God. They are God's covenant people; but they have been living apart from God. Their rituals and their traditions may be religious; but their hearts are distant from the Lord.

So John calls them back. John preaches repentance to them; and, in his unique, striking way, he reminds the people that their relationship with God is old and stale. They need to have their relationship with God redefined and renewed. "Start fresh," he's telling them. "Get right with God." And there are crowds of people, the Bible tells us, dipping down into the river water, trying desperately to reconnect themselves with their God. "Take me to the river," those people were saying.

One man wades into the river. He immerses himself, comes up dripping wet, then stands there praying. His relationship with God the Father is being redefined, too. His name is Jesus. He is the very Son of God, part of the eternal, holy, Triune Godhead. He has become a man, a human, and now Jesus is beginning his mission. He stands in the river, not as a sinner, not as one who needs purification. He stands there, for all to see, making himself one with humanity. Jesus is coming to the river to take on himself our sin, to identify himself with our failures and weaknesses. And God the Father looks down on the drenched, dripping Jesus, and what does he say? "You are my beloved Son. With you I am well pleased."

Is God well pleased with you? What does God say when he looks at you today? Is he delighted at what an excellent parent, or spouse, you've been this past week? Is God elated over the witness you've given to him? Satisfied with your purity level? Thrilled with how you've handled all of your

temptations and lived up to all of your commitments this week?

When God looks at me, I know that he is well aware of my all of my shortcomings, and I'm pretty sure, deep down, you know that about yourself, too. God looks at us today, and he sees a whole lot of people who need cleansing. For sin is dirty. Our sin makes us foul. My sin separates me from God in every way, and your sin ruins your relationship with your Maker.

We all need that relationship to be redefined, re-created, renewed. Just like the Israelite people back in John the Baptist's day, "Take me to the river" needs to be our theme song today!

So what do we do? How do we do it? Should we march out that door, walk down the hill, and one by one dip ourselves into the waters of Smith Creek? Take a church pilgrimage to Falls Lake, or Jordan Lake, or even the Jordan River in the Holy Land? Do we need to be re-baptized, in order to restore our relationship with God?

That's not it. That's not the answer. The Bible really tells us that there's only one baptism that's needed. If I had to get re-baptized every time I got dirty, spiritually-speaking, I'd be dipping and dunking daily.

Thankfully, my baptism, 57 years ago -- and your baptism, whenever it took place -- is a lifetime washing. There's no expiration date on a baptized Christian. Because when you were baptized, you were brought into a new relationship with God. Whether you were baptized as an infant, as a teenager, or as an adult -- whether you were baptized in a river or in a church; whether you were immersed or sprinkled or hosed down -- if you were baptized with water, in the

name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (as Christ himself commands), then you were initiated into a brand-new, re-defined, re-created, life-long relationship with the heavenly Father.

You see, your relationship with God is based now on what Jesus Christ has done for you. It's no longer based on what you do, or on what you decide. The Son of God stood in that river for you. He took your place. Jesus took your punishment. He died on the cross for you, and for me; and we are saved from sin, once and for all, by Jesus.

We live now by faith in Jesus. We're saved now by faith in Jesus. We're going to make it through this world, and we're going to get to heaven, by faith in Jesus. We've been washed, cleansed, dipped, saved, by faith in Jesus.

"Take me to the river," we Christians say today. That means, as humble sinners, we recommit ourselves today to our baptism faith. "Take me to the river" means that we recommit ourselves today to faith in Jesus, who stood in the river and redefined our relationship with God for all time. "Take me to the river" means we thank God for our baptisms! "Take me to the river" means we thank God for the Savior Jesus! He's the one who dips us in the water, washes us down, cleanses our souls, and puts our feet on the ground.

Take me to the river, Lord. Amen.