

“The Son of God Baptized?”

I live really close to the church. So close, that the days I get in my car to drive here, GPS gives me a commute time of 4 minutes or less—and that’s with traffic! But I don’t always drive. Many days I ride my bike, and some days I even walk. And when I do, those are the days I enjoy my commute the most, mainly because the greenway offers me such a great route. And one of the highlights of that route are the two bridge crossings, one over Dunn Creek and one over Smith Creek. I always slow down if I’m riding my bike, or stop for a moment or two if I’m walking, just to watch and listen to the water. On a calm day, the sounds of the creeks are energizing as the swallow water swiftly makes it way over the dips and around the bends. Even after a big rain, when the water swells and the sounds escalate, I still find it an invigorating experience, and always pause to take it in.

Now contrast this scene with Dunn Creek and Smith Creek, or really any of the many creeks and streams that we find throughout our great state, with a huge river like the mighty Mississippi. Maybe you’ve been to St. Louis or Memphis or New Orleans and stood the banks of the river, looking out over the vast calmness as the water moves effortlessly along. If you have, you know that you could close your eyes and you might not hear a thing. And yet even with your eyes closed, you still know it’s there, because you can almost feel its power and its strength.

For me, the image of these two experiences—one with the creeks, and the other with the mighty Mississippi, capture something about the two main characters in our Gospel reading today— John the Baptist and Jesus.

John the Baptist is like the creeks. He’s kind of wild and a little unpredictable—definitely an “in-your-face” kind of guy. “Hey, I baptize you with water,” he says to the crowd, “but one mightier than me is coming...and he’s so legit that I’m not even worthy of untying the strap of his sandals. You think what I’m doing is special? This guy will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” John was direct like that, to say the least, but his energy was contagious, proven by the growing crowds who were clinging to his every word.

But however John communicated his message, he had a very good understanding of Jesus' ultimate mission, and knew he was only preparing the way for him—at least that seemed to be the case until Jesus shows up.

Jesus, of course, is the one like the big calm river. He doesn't call any attention to himself. In fact, he actually identifies with the people whom he came to save. Matthew, in his Gospel, tells us that the association of Jesus with sinners coming for baptism actually brought forth a protest from John. John tried to stop him basically saying, "What are you doing? I'm the one who should be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?" But Jesus' answer, even though it points to his work of fulfilling the entire will of God for us, is like the calm but mighty Mississippi. "It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness," he says. Of course Luke doesn't give us this much information. But still, we know from his Gospel, that the sinless Jesus does not separate himself from the others, but becomes one with them. The bottom line is that the Son of God was baptized.

Have you ever wondered about this? Have you ever put much thought into it? I know I have, because on the surface, it doesn't make a lot of sense. John made it clear that he baptized for repentance. John knew Jesus didn't need to repent of anything. Plus, John had already said one who was mightier than he was coming, and he knew that it was Jesus. And yet at Jesus', request, John baptized him anyway. Why?

One way I've heard it described is this: "Imagine a flock of sheep on the bank of a river that are all filthy and smelly. John is there, and he takes each sheep, one at a time, and dips them in the water where all the filth and funk is washed off. He then places them on the other side of the river, bathed and clean. Now imagine, in the middle of the filthy flock is a lamb who is gleaming white. There's not a spot in him. He walks up to the edge of the river, John looks him over and says, "You don't need this— get out of here." But the lamb doesn't leave. No matter what John did or said, the lamb doesn't leave. So out of frustration, John gives up and takes the pure white lamb into the river. As he dips him in the water all of the filth and grime from the other lambs is absorbed into his white wool. The lamb now looks and smells disgusting. John points to this lamb and proclaims, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

That pretty good isn't it? You see, something we have to remember here is that Jesus was about to begin his public ministry. And before he could start, he needed to do something vitally important. He needed to enter into the world of unrighteousness. So on that day, along the banks of the Jordan River, the Son of God literally stepped into

the dirty waters of our world. And by doing so, he was preparing himself, and all of us, for what was to come (point to the cross).

That's the starting point of applying Jesus' baptism to our lives today. But it's easy to forget about this most amazing event— even with the opening of the heavens and the full display of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—or at least kind of tuck it away, because of all the other things we know about Jesus. I mean, we just went through the whole Christmas story—we know that part fairly well. Good Friday—we know that part. Easter? We know that part. We know many true and accurate things about Jesus that are the difference between life and death, heaven and hell, so is not remembering his baptism really that big of a deal?

Yes, it is...because even though we might think we know Jesus pretty well, the truth is Jesus is deeper than any of us know. Think about all the troubles in your life. Think about all of the troubles that your own sinfulness has brought upon your life. Think about all the trouble you have because of the sinfulness, the unrighteousness of other people. At his baptism, Jesus steps into that world, standing in solidarity with sinful humanity, to ultimately make it right.

I know it doesn't always feel this way. I know we want more proof that Jesus is really there, and that all this stuff actually matters. We want the energizing Jesus like the shallow creeks and streams, but most of the time we get the silent Jesus of the deep and mighty Mississippi. But remember how I described that big river at the beginning? I said you could close your eyes and might not hear a thing. But you still know it's there, because you can almost feel its power and its strength. That's how it is with Jesus.

My friends, never confuse Jesus' silence for lack of caring about you. Don't conclude that your prayer for help is not being answered. Jesus was baptized to assure you that He is standing with you. Trust that promise! His care for you runs deep. In all the mess of our your life and mine—in all the unrighteousness of our lives, Jesus brings us God's righteousness. And he brought that to you and me in the waters of our own baptisms. As Paul reminds us, "we have been united with him in his death and resurrection." Never forget that.

Jesus' presence gives you the calm composure and confidence to face daily life, and one day he will bring you to the still waters of his eternal house.

Until then, no matter what you face, know that the most the important person of all stands with you. His name is Jesus. **Amen.**