

March 16, 2014  
The Life of John the Baptist

*Jesus's Baptism*  
Matthew 3:13-17

**Opening words:** Lent is the Christian season of preparation prior to Easter. Excluding Sundays, it lasts for 40 days. The number forty is one of those sacred numbers in the Bible. It rained for 40 days and nights in Noah's story. The Hebrews wandered for 40 years before entering into the Promised Land. Jesus fasted 40 days before being tempted by Satan in the wilderness. The resurrected Jesus walked the face of this world for 40 days before ascending into heaven. This year Easter is April 20, so Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, was March 5.

Lent is the time to examine yourself and discover what is holding you back for a closer walk with God. How easy it is to see the imperfections in others and be blind to our own. We look good next to the cast of characters on the evening news wearing the orange jump suits. However, comparing ourselves to Jesus is another story. Our imperfections are suddenly clear. The Wesleyan tradition has always encouraged us to strive toward perfection. We should never be satisfied with our present state, because none of us is perfect.

This year's Lenten sermon series is called *The Life of John the Baptist*. To date, we have looked at John's birth and his message. Today, we look at Jesus's baptism. When we left John last week, he was surrounded by sinners, each one hungry to be baptized as a sign of their repentance. Their sins were being washed away. However, in the middle of that sinful crowd was one sinless man, Jesus. He wants to be baptized too. Why would the sinless Jesus be interested in a sinner's baptism? I will give you three reasons.

1. Jesus's baptism fulfilled all righteousness. In other words, Jesus was part of God's plan for the salvation of the world.
2. Jesus's baptism ignited his earthly ministry and ended John's contributions.
3. Jesus's baptism shows us that he completely identified with the sins of mankind.

The baptism of Jesus is found in all four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. May God give you ears to hear Matthew's version, Matthew 3:13-17. This is sermon number three in this series. Let me call this message, *Jesus's Baptism*.

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**Matthew 3:13-17** Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. <sup>14</sup> But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

<sup>15</sup> Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

<sup>16</sup> As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

<sup>17</sup> And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

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Augustine once said, "*Jesus Christ is not valued at all until He is valued above all.*"

Have you heard the story of Katheryn Deprill? She is a 27-year-old married woman with three young children, who lives near Allentown, Pa. When she was 12 years old she was working on a school project about her family tree. Her parents, Carl and Brenda Hollis, slid a scrapbook in front of her and told her the truth. She was adopted! There is nothing glamorous about her story. She was abandoned by her biological mother in the restroom of the local Burger King. In time, she was adopted by Carl and Brenda. Katheryn will always consider them her parents, but she is determined to find her biological mother. She holds no hard feelings against her. She just wants to meet her to fill a void in her heart. It was her mother's idea to seek help on Facebook. More than 30,000 friends are trying to help Katheryn find the woman who gave her life. To date, her biological mother is still missing. That story grabbed my attention at several levels. This is one. That story reminds us of the importance of identity. If you can agree with that statement, say, "**Amen!**" Let's look at this morning's scripture lesson together.

When we last left John, he was in the wilderness baptizing the sinners. Everyone was there. John did not discriminate. He welcomed everyone. There were men and women. There were the young and old. There was the rich and the poor. Everyone came because everyone had sinned. If John would have lived in our generation, then we would have gone as well. We are sinners too. Everyone who has ever lived needs forgiveness, except one, Jesus. In a sea of sinful faces John sees one sinless face, Jesus! Listen to what I am about to say.

This was not the first time John had seen Jesus. They were related on their mother's side. Elizabeth and Mary were related. The connection is not clear. Some say they were cousins. Some say Elizabeth was Mary's aunt. Some say they were related in other ways. This was not the first day John had experienced Jesus. Do you remember the story? He jumped in his mother's womb when the pregnant Mary came for a visit. (Luke 2:41) Yet, this time was different. This time, John isolates Jesus from the rest of the sinners. John doesn't know why Jesus needs to be baptized. After all, he was sinless. Yet, he concedes and the rest is history. In the next three years, Jesus would transform the world and set into motion something new.

The entire story is magnificent, but one line grabbed my attention this week. Verse 17 quotes God. The creator of the universe said, "*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.*" That single verse is extremely important. It erases any question about Jesus's identity. The people had been waiting for the Messiah a long time. Some had believed that John, himself, might have been the Messiah. (Luke 3:15) That single verse eliminated all the questions. God, himself, had put his seal of approval on Jesus's ministry. Jesus was the Messiah! From that point no one could question Jesus' identity.

Never underestimate the importance of a correct identification. It has always been true. It is true in our time.

Several years ago, I was at the "savings store". You know the savings store? Can I be honest with you? Every time, I go to the savings store, I end up back in the electronics department. I am not a big television watcher, but I love to look at all the televisions on the back wall. The screens are all different sizes, but each picture is equally beautiful. I love it when all the screens have the same picture. I was just standing there studying a picture of a parrot, when someone jolted me back to reality. This woman grabbed me by my right arm, swung me around and said, "Randall, is that you?" She gave me a big hug and continued, "Are you home for a visit, or have you moved back?" I looked at her and said, "I am not Randall." She turned a million shades of red and said, "I am so sorry. You look just like my cousin, Randall." I said, "It is fine. He must be an extra good-looking man." She smiled and said, "Yes, he is." Making the right identification is important!

The other night Kathryn was out with friends. After dinner, the check came and she tried to pay with a debit card. It was one of those embarrassing moments. Her card was rejected. No, there was not a lack of funds. However, there was a lack of identity. We got one of those 877 calls to tell us someone had used her numbers to make a fraudulent purchase. Does anyone know how that happens? Can anyone tell me who tried to stick me with a \$300 purchase from Belk's Department store in Guntersville, Alabama? Making the right identification is important!

Late on Wednesday afternoon, I registered for Annual Conference. You can do it on-line these days. It made me think of that happy week at Lakeside. I looked at the agenda for the week. The retirement service is Monday night. Ordination is Tuesday night. I will be honest with you. I know fewer people being ordained and more people retiring. I like the ordination service because it is structured and filled with liturgy. Every year the same scriptures are read. One of the scriptures read annually is the calling of Isaiah, Isaiah 6:1-8. Do you know that scripture? The great prophet is having a vision and sees God sitting on a throne. God is high and exalted. His train fills the temple. Angelic creatures are by his side, who are proclaiming his holiness. Isaiah is intimidated by the scene and begins to question his future. The creatures purify him and God asks the question, "Whom shall I send?" The prophet volunteers by saying, "Here I am. Send me!" It is a complex story of identity. Making the right identification is important! Verse 17 says it clearly: Jesus was the Messiah! Our only hope of salvation. This is my question for you. Have you identified Jesus as the Messiah? Do you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

May 20 is going to be a great day here at Western Reserve. For it is on that date we are going to confirm this year's confirmation class. Every Sunday morning I walk through the back halls of this church and visit all the Sunday schools classes. I make sure to always visit the confirmation class. I really enjoy my few minutes with them because they are great young people. As their pastor, I am proud of them. I am sure their parents are proud of them. You can be proud of them. They are working hard to cover all the material.

They have learned a great deal this year. They have learned some church history. They have learned some Methodist history. They have learned about the structure of the United Methodist Church. They can tell you how many Annual Conferences exist. They know we are in the Mahoning Valley District of the East Ohio Annual Conference. They know District Superintendents can serve up to six years and pastors are appointed annually. They have experienced different traditions. They have visited a synagogue, an orthodox church and a Roman Catholic Church. In the near future they will visit St. John's Episcopal Church on Wick Avenue in Youngstown. I'm glad they are learning all those things, but I really only want them to know one thing, Jesus! If you don't know Jesus, then nothing else really matters! After all, Jesus is the son of God. Our only hope of salvation!

I did some math the other night and discovered I have been in the ministry 32 years. (I know that is hard to believe because I look so young!) I was a youth director in Frankfort, Indiana for a year. I was the pastor of the Pleasant Grove Christian Church in Lancaster, Kentucky for three years. I served in the old St. Clairsville and Wooster Districts for three years. I was the pastor of the Hathaway United Methodist Church for five years, and have been here for twenty years. I learned early on that certain things have to happen in the life of the local church. That is quite a list. The building has to be maintained and the bills have to get paid. I also learned that if someone else is worried about those things, I don't have to worry about them. We have some great people here who worry about all kinds of things to keep this church moving forward. I only worry about one thing in this church. Do you know what it is? Jesus! No one here seems to worry about him. No one here really even talks about him. I wish we talked more about Jesus and less about ourselves. After all, Jesus is the son of God. Our only hope of salvation!

There is an old preaching story about a church who received a new minister. The church was full for his first Sunday and he preached a wonderful sermon about Jesus. The second Sunday came, and he preached another wonderful sermon about Jesus. His third sermon was about Jesus. Each week the congregation heard a wonderful sermon about Jesus. This went on for months. Everyone should have been happy, but this was a church. Someone had to complain about all those wonderful sermons about Jesus. One man did and pulled the minister to the side after worship one Sunday. In the corner of the narthex he confronted the minister. He began by saying, "Your sermons about Jesus are very good. However, you have been here for months and all we have heard is about Jesus. Our world is a complex place and there are many social ills. There are people starving to death. There are diseases that have no cure. There are people who can't read. There are children lost in slavery and lives being lost in wars. We don't hear about any of those things. All we hear about is Jesus! Don't any of those things matter? And the pastor said, "No! Once the world knows Jesus, all those other issues will go away." After all, Jesus is the son of God. Our only hope of salvation. In the life of the church, what really matters to you? Augustine once said, *"Jesus Christ is not valued at all until He is valued above all."*

Will you pray with me?