

Mark 1:4-11

⁴John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

⁵The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him. They were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins. ⁶John was clothed in camel's hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He preached, "One more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals! ⁸I baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰Just as Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with you."

Heaven Torn Open

I.

The sky is dark. The crowd filled with anticipation. Suddenly, it happens. The sky is ripped open by light and color and the concussions from the blasts of the fireworks make your whole body vibrate.

All of this was anticipated, however. You *knew* it was coming. While a fireworks show isn't something you see every day you are not one bit surprised by what happens.

Contrast that with the baptism of Jesus. Just a simple, ordinary looking guy. The Son of a carpenter, you've heard. No doubt he'll follow in the footsteps of Joseph, like many young men would do, and learn the trade of carpenter from his father.

Then he stands up in the waters of the Jordan River and all heaven breaks loose. You weren't expecting that! *Nobody* was expecting that! The Holy Spirit descends on Jesus in the form of a dove and the Father speaks from heaven saying: "You are my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with you" (Mark 1:11, EHV). Never before or since has anything been seen like it.

It had started out as just an ordinary day. A bunch of people headed out into the wilderness to see the latest curiosity. John was just the carnival side-show of his day. Would today's show be the prosaic guess your weight within two pounds, or the Flying Wallendas walking the tightrope without a net? They journeyed to the desert by the score to see with their own eyes and hear with their own ears this man dubbed John the Baptist.

John's appearance was pretty ordinary. His diet was no new, special method anyone wanted to buy franchises in. But his message was riveting. "The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him. They were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins... ⁷ He preached, 'One more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals! ⁸I baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit'" (Mark 1:5, 7-8, EHV).

John's appearance was unremarkable, but his message was divine. The people recognized there was something special about it. The Jordan River might have figured prominently in Jewish history, but it's nothing compared to the great rivers of the world. Even One of those coming out to see John didn't seem too remarkable. Jesus was not from

anywhere special, but a man who grew up in Nazareth. Later on, even some of those who would become Jesus' disciples took some convincing when they heard the One thought to be the Promised Messiah was from Nazareth. "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" (John 1:46, EHV), one of them asked.

On this particular day John baptized Jesus and that totally unexpected event took place. "Just as Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with you'" (Mark 1:10-11, EHV).

This is an event beyond anything you dreamed when you came out to the banks of the Jordan. Far more brilliant than the anticipated side-show event. Never should a doubt remain for any of those standing there to witness *this*! A voice spoke from heaven. The voice of God himself. How honored you are to be there! God himself calls this the anointing of his Son as the Promised Messiah.

II.

Awe inspiring? Yes! But also intimidating. Humbling. A little bit frightening. The Father says: "You are my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with you." Can *your* loved ones say that about you? Even if they *do* at times say such things, you know it isn't even *close* to the same impact those words have coming from God. Your relationships with parents, children, loved ones and friends of any kind are complete failures in comparison.

Children are to obey their parents. Jesus *always* did, but you haven't. A husband is to love his wife just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her. You know *you* haven't. A wife is to respect and obey her husband in the same way the Church respects and obeys Christ. You know *you* haven't. Siblings are to support one another, not fight and bicker and argue.

But the ultimate comparison isn't just the familial one. You know that mankind's relationship with the Heavenly Father was destroyed by the sin of our first parents. From that day forward the Father has not declared his pleasure this way with any other human being. He cannot, for his "well pleased" declares that there is perfection, and there certainly is not.

The very First Commandment shoots your relationship with the Father to the ground: "You shall have no other gods beside me" (Exodus 20:3, EHV). All too often you elevate certain things in your life above God: your possessions, your job, the people in your life, your own desires and well-being. Even if those things don't take first place in your heart, they often try to share the spotlight with God. It's completely unacceptable. You even claim when you don't get your way that the Heavenly Father does not love you the way he ought to.

But Jesus' baptism is not an event that seeks to shame you about your own failed relationships, or to nag you that your relationship with the Heavenly Father isn't what it should be. Instead, it is to show the Christ — the Messiah — to you. That's what the season of Epiphany is all about — Epiphany is the season that reminds us that Jesus is revealed as both God and Savior.

III.

At his baptism Jesus was revealed as God's Promised Messiah. Even after the event his glory was often veiled until he had completed the work he came to do, lest anyone should get the wrong impressions about what he was here to accomplish. The baptism of Jesus is special because it reveals the new, ultimate relationship *you* now have with the Heavenly

Father.

Whether you were baptized as an infant and have only your parents' or sponsors recollection of the event and your baptismal certificate, or you were baptized as an adult and can vividly remember the day you were baptized, you were officially born into a new family. You were adopted as a child of God.

While you didn't lose your earthly family, you received much closer and more important family ties. Human parents with all their flaws and faults are set aside by a new Heavenly Father. Sibling relationships are superseded by a Brother who is both fully God and fully human, who loved you so much as his family that he took your load of sin on himself to pay for it with his own blood.

Before his baptism there might have been questions about who Jesus was. *After* his baptism there could be no doubt: this Jesus is the Son of God.

Before your own baptism there were questions about you were. *After* your baptism there can be no doubt. When the pastor sprinkled water on you and announced: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," the heavens were torn open. God identified himself as your Father, and you as his sons and daughters. What Jesus accomplished on the cross for all people became yours personally. Your sins against the First Commandment and against your family and all your other sins were erased in the eyes of God. You have been forgiven.

In the Sacrament of Baptism your family relations are retooled. Not only your heavenly family, but your earthly family, as well. All baptized Christians are part of the one family that is both in heaven and on earth. The Apostle Paul writes: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in the one hope of your calling. ⁵ There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in us all" (Ephesians 4:4-6, EHV).

IV.

Common? Ordinary? When you look at your baptism certainly there are many common and ordinary things. You yourself, the pastor, the font, water. There's nothing really all that spectacular about any of these things. For some the occasion might seem like nothing more than a curiosity — something people do just to perform a duty, or fulfill a custom.

As for you, remember it for what it is. Remember that *your* baptism is like Jesus' baptism — the heavens are torn open to welcome you in. "You are my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with you" (Mark 1:11, EHV), the Father said to Jesus. And because of *him*, the Father declares *you* to be part of his family, too. Amen.