

**Mark 1:4-11 John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.**

**<sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>John was clothed in camel's hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>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! <sup>8</sup>I baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." <sup>9</sup>In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with you."**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, dear brothers and sisters in Christ. I don't know about you and your families, but in our house, it's been said more than once that these are some crazy times we are living in. It's gotten to the point where I just want to escape, to think about something else, anything else as long as it has nothing to do with politics or the coronavirus. I sense you may feel the same way.

Given the kind of kings and leaders and Roman oppression the people of Jerusalem and greater Judea were living under, no doubt they wanted an escape too. And they found it in John. They left the city, their village, all things government, civilization altogether, and went out to the wilderness to see the Baptizer. And John gave them what they were looking for. He preached a message not of politics or how God's goal for them was earthly wealth and pleasures. Nothing of the sort. His message was simple: Repent. Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins. John used this message to remind God's people that there was more to life than this life.

And so the people came, not confessing their political frustrations or their disagreements, but their sins. And as we read Mark's account it almost sounds like after John would baptize someone, he would send each one out of the river with the same message, not unlike the dismissal I give after you receive the Lord's Supper — May this true body and blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, ever strengthen and keep you in the true faith, unto life ever lasting. It's a way to remind you of the magnitude of what you just received — Jesus' body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins. John used his baptism as another way to point the people to

Christ. As legitimate and beneficial as his baptism was — for the forgiveness of their sins — he reminded each of them that, **"One more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals! <sup>8</sup>I baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."**

And so they escaped the hardships of their every day lives by hearing a two fold message — their sins were forgiven and their Savior was coming. It gave them hope. It reminded them that there was more to life than poverty and politics, but that God was in control and there was a much bigger plan and purpose in place than who was ruling over the land of Israel and and what their future held.

Over the last year and especially the last 3 months our country has become so divided. In a time when no one is able to go to a professional sporting event, America's pastime seems to have now become "Debate it, fight it, take a stand." "Where do you stand? Why? Well, here's why *not*." If we were citizens of this world, this is all we would have. This is all we could do and should do. But we are not citizens of this world. Escape to the wilderness and hear this message of John, that first and foremost this is not a time to take sides, to debate, or take a stand. This is a time to *repent*. To turn from the ways we have relied on our health and wealth, on king and country, on our national heritage and rule of law, as if *these* things are what make or break our future, as if *this* is what our time in this world is all about.

These are trying times, there's no doubt about that. But where as the devil tries to use all things for evil, God doesn't try, he promises to work all things together for our good — "big picture" good. See the big picture. See that if nothing else, God is using these trying times to draw us closer to himself. How many times over the last year have you had to grow in your trust in God. That's a good thing! How many times over the last year did you have to let go of how *you thought* things were going to be, turn out, or end up, and instead were reminded that *God* is in control, that God is the ultimate authority, that God has the ultimate plan and is working it out for your ultimate, eternal good?

It's times like these that uncover the true intentions of our sinful hearts — to drift one, two, three steps or more away from God to go our own way. It's times like these that the lights get turned up on our faith, or lack there of, revealing how far we've strayed, the truth that our faith, our hope, our trust at times *has* been misplaced. Escape to the wilderness and hear John's word — Repent. That's what trying times are for. Because to repent

is to confess our sins, to turn back to God, to see the big picture, to see by faith that he is in control with his power, his grace, mercy, and forgiveness, not just the here and now, but the big picture, here now, and forever.

We see that in the text before us today. It wasn't long into John's ministry that Jesus came, not to drive out the Romans, not to end poverty. He came and was baptized. Other Gospel writers take time to note John's apprehension to baptizing Jesus, but not Mark. He gets right to the main point: As the lowliest of the low baptized the highest of the high, the Trinity showed itself: The Spirit anointed God's Son for the special, promised, and long-awaited *plan of salvation* from sin, death, hell, and the devil. And, the Father declared the truth of Jesus' identity.

**You are my Son...** God's Son, in our world, standing among us. What was God's Son doing there, standing on the banks of the Jordan River? What was his purpose? What was he anointed for? Why did he need to be baptized? Again, you have to think big picture!

Scripture reveals that it was "to fulfill *all* righteousness," that is, so that he could be our perfect substitute. While Jesus was without sin, and had lived a perfect life up to that point, he was stepping into his public role as our substitute, who would give his perfect life up for us and take our sins to the cross. Looking ahead to that substitution, his death in our place, he was baptized for all the sins that we and the world would commit, but that he would bear.

And the best part of the Father's announcement was his declaration of love and pleasure over his Son. Jesus was on track. He was perfectly in line with his Father's will. He was our perfect substitute. His trust was always in his Father, never in himself, wealth, or health. His strength always was sought from the Holy Spirit, never in the worldly or temporal things that surrounded him and that he could have had so easily. He never was distracted by the temptations of the devil, the world, or the desires of the sinners around him.

In the midst of our repentance, the confession of our sins both foolish and wicked, we have an escape: the baptism of Jesus. Willingly he became our perfect substitute, our real Savior, who has made all things right again between us and God.

Who could complain about how God has treated us? Even in times like these he uses them for our good, to lead us to repentance and to the outpouring of his grace. It's a spiritual exercise that brings with it true and lasting contentment and peace, and even joy and happiness.

And if that wasn't enough, there's more. He's given to each of us our own personal oasis of escape. Your own baptism. As Jesus was baptized with water, so too were you. Through water and the Word you were joined with him forever. Your baptism is where you can go to escape the evils of this world and all the uncertainty of the future. For at your baptism, as at Jesus', the Trinity was hidden, but really there: the Spirit covered you and now dwells in you; the Son presented you to his Father as one for whom he did all of his work; the Father was and remains well pleased with you because of what his Son has done for you.

So that *there* is where you can say with certainty, "I, even I have been joined forever to my Savior. Jesus is *my* substitute. Through those waters, I, even I have been forgiven. I, even I, have been made righteous and holy in God's sight. I, even I, will dwell with him in heaven forever." For in your baptism, God says those words of you — words that overcome any trial or test to our faith, words that calm our spirit no matter what we're up against — "You are my son. You are my daughter, whom I love. I am well pleased with you."

Maybe after last week or the last months, or the last year you need an escape from everything going on. And here, today, through the word of John and the work of Jesus, we have it. You are part of God's big picture of which he is always in control. When your mind wanders, when your anxiety shoots up, when you just don't know anymore, use these times to remember, there's more to life than this life. Escape to the wilderness and hear John's Word — repent! Escape to the waters of baptism and see you Savior's work. By his life, death, and resurrection, your ultimate escape has been secured — from sin, death, hell and the devil.

It always seems that in times like these God's Word and works become so much more meaningful and treasured. All the people of Jerusalem were coming out to see a man who lived in the wilderness, ate locusts and wild honey, and dressed in camel skins. Why? Because his message was filled with hope in difficult times. May the same message of hope sustain us still today. May it ever be our refuge in difficult and uncertain times. May it lead us always to remember first to repent, that we can always give thanks, to praise our God, today, tomorrow, and forever. Amen.