

And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. <sup>6</sup> John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. <sup>8</sup> I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." <sup>9</sup> At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven 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; with you I am well pleased."

Sometimes I think that Alcoholics Anonymous understand repentance better than Christians do. You will sometimes hear a Christian say that he "repented of his sin." It's done. It's over with. It's in your past. You would never hear someone in AA talk that way. They will openly admit, "I am an alcoholic. I take it one day at a time." In other words, they never stop fighting against that urge to take another drink. They didn't just decide to stop drinking and be done with it. They make that decision every single day.

In the same way, a Christian never finishes their life of repentance. Luther wrote in the first of the ninety-five theses that the entire life of a Christian is one of repenting. If that sounds daunting, it is. Even if we manage to get past one sin in our life, there are always at least a hundred sins to take its place. Who can say that he or she has *fully* repented of any sin? And some sins are so deeply rooted in our hearts that it is a terrible struggle. Mark has good news for us this morning.

### **Hope for your life of repentance!**

#### **I. You have the power of baptism working for you**

Our text says that John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Let's dispel a few faulty notions about repentance. First, don't think that John preached a harsh message of the law and Jesus preached the gospel. John's message and Jesus' message were practically identical, with one exception. John's preaching pointed to Jesus and Jesus let his preaching speak for itself.

You sometimes hear people express the opinion that we should not preach so much law and only preach the gospel. The fact is that in a life of repentance, you need both. John preached a "baptism OF repentance FOR The forgiveness of sins." You need both law and gospel in your life of repentance. The law shines the light on the deepest recesses in your heart and convicts you of sins you may otherwise never have acknowledged, even to yourself. The gospel shows

you that God has forgiven that sin for Jesus' sake and washed it away in the waters of your baptism.

Or would you rather not have God expose some of those sins in your heart? Imagine going into the doctor's office for a check-up. When he runs some tests and comes back into the room, his face shows worry and concern. You wonder what he found. Can you imagine yourself saying, "Doctor, whatever you just found out about my body, I don't want to know. I can't deal with the bad news right now. If my heart is bad, don't tell me because I don't think I want to change my eating and drinking habits. If I have cancer, don't tell me, because I don't want to deal with that right now. Just tell me I'm o.k. because I don't want to be sick." How can the doctor treat you unless you admit that you are sick?

That's the purpose of the law for your heart – to show you that you are sick and in need God's healing. If you are holding on to a sin in your life and not repenting of it, don't you want to know that this sin has become your god, your idol? The law is good and does good work in our hearts. It just doesn't feel good. When Jesus spoke to the rich young man and told him to sell his possessions and follow him, he went away sad because it exposed the idolatry of greed in his heart. When John told the Pharisees they were a brood of snakes because of their hypocrisy, they became angry with John. When John told Herod he was committing adultery with his brother's wife, Herod threw him in prison. Your sinful nature will always resist the work of the law in your heart. It doesn't want to change. And that's what the word repentance means. It means a change of heart or mind.

What sins does the law need to expose in your heart? This is one reason why a daily devotional life and prayer life is so important. Take the time to do the searching and probing in your heart. You can't read the Bible without being convicted. You can't pray through the Ten Commandments without uncovering some sin which you have committed today, or some attitude that you let stagnate in your heart that is sinful and destructive.

But don't stop there. John preached a baptism of repentance **FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS**. The goal of your repenting daily is always to apply God's forgiveness to your troubled soul, especially the promise he has given to you in your baptism. Listen to what Paul wrote in Titus 3: **"[God] saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life."** All your sins are washed away by the blood of Jesus and by the waters of your baptism. When you uncover a sin in your heart, remind yourself of that promise. "I am baptized into Christ. My sin is forgiven by the blood of Jesus."

And then ask God to take away that sin or that desire. See, there are two parts to forgiveness. One is that God does not count your sin against you. You are fully acquitted and will face no punishment for your sin. The other is that by the powerful working of his Word through the sacrament of Baptism, he takes that sin away. Listen again to his Word in Titus 2: 11-12: **"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us**

**to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled and godly lives in this present age.”** The law can convict you but it cannot save you. It can make you ashamed, but it cannot make you hate your sin. It cannot change your heart. Only the gospel can do that. And it will. You have the power of baptism working in you. This story tells us something else as well. It shows us that the whole Triune God is behind us.

## **II. You have the Triune God behind you**

Listen to the story: **“At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven 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; with you I am well pleased.”** This is an important story in the Bible for several reasons. One is that it shows us most clearly that we have a Triune God. You see the Son of God standing in the water to be baptized. You hear the Father’s clear voice from heaven saying, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” And finally, you see the Holy Spirit coming down in the form of a dove and resting on Jesus. There are three distinct persons and yet there is only one God. We cannot understand how God can be three in one and one in three, but this is what the Bible teaches and this is what we believe.

Jesus’ baptism also teaches us something about Jesus. He is clearly the Son of God. He is fully human at the same time. Jesus didn’t need baptism the way that we need baptism. We need baptism to wash away our sins. Jesus had no sins to wash away. He had lived thirty years of his life, and God the Father could still say about Jesus, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” The last time we saw Jesus, he was twelve years old and had visited the temple. Do you know how naughty a twelve-year old boy can be? The one thing I remember about myself when I was twelve years old is that my younger brother and I had an ongoing battle every single day. I must confess that I picked on him mercilessly. I loved to see him get angry. Every day. Seventeen hours a day. I think I may have even picked on him while we were sleeping. I am surprised he doesn’t hate me still today. Jesus had brothers and he never picked on them. After we saw him in the temple, impressing the teachers of the law, the Bible says that **“he grew in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and men.”** He never sinned. Not once. Not ever.

And the Bible says, **“You are all the sons of God by through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:26-26).** Do you see what your baptism means? It means that God can look at you and he does not see your sins. He sees only Jesus, because you are clothed with Christ. And he says, “You are my son, my daughter, and in you I am well pleased!”

All three persons of the Triune God were there at Jesus baptism. The Father was there because he had planned our salvation from the beginning of time, and he was determined to set his plan in motion. He put his blessing on Jesus as he began his ministry and his journey to the

cross. The Son was there, the one who was chosen to be the Christ, the anointed one, the Savior of the world. And the Holy Spirit was there. He descended upon Jesus. The Holy Spirit came upon Jesus and stayed with Jesus his whole ministry. The point I am making is that your whole Triune God was invested in your salvation.

And he still is. Repenting is hard work. Repenting is something you are doing twenty-four seven. Repenting is something you cannot do by yourself. But you were baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The Father loves you and sees you holy in Jesus. The Son who redeemed you from his cross stands by you every day and pleads your case before the Father's throne. The Holy Spirit whom you received in your baptism is working in your heart this moment and every day. Don't you see that it is your Triune God who is working in you both to will and to act according to his will (Php. 2:13).

Is repenting hard work? Yes, it is. But remember who you are. When I worked out in Glacier National Park for two summers, there were a lot of temptations to drink too much and to let my morals down. I was far from home. My family wouldn't keep track of me. There was one thing that helped me. Half of the bus drivers were seminary students and all the drivers wore red jackets – all the time. We loved our red jackets. When you met someone, they would often ask, "Are you one of those seminary students?" People knew who I was just by the jacket I was wearing, and I didn't want to give my Savior a bad reputation by my actions. Well, you wear Christ every day. You are clothed with Christ in your baptism. Whether you are aware of it or not, people know who you are. You are a child of God, redeemed by the blood of Jesus. How can we bring shame on the name of him who died to set us free from sin?

Is repenting hard? Yes. It is something we have to keep doing every day. Remember your baptism. Remember that you have your Triune God behind you. Amen.