

Christmas is over. Even the wise men have come and gone. The decorations are put away, and we risk putting the purpose of all that in storage as well. Jesus has come, but for what? In real time, some thirty years pass between the first Christmas and Jesus' baptism, but it's a good thing that the church year fast-forwards to the Jordan River, so we don't lose sight of that purpose. John the Baptist baptized lots and lots of people, but this baptism is absolutely unique. And if you are a baptized Christian, you are connected to this baptism. This involves you completely. Whether you're conscious of it or not, this baptism changed the course of your life forever. Let's see how this works.

When Ed Koch was mayor of New York City, he was famous for hitting the sidewalk and asking his constituents, "How am I doing?" He took his cues and set his course based on their replies. He was pleased when people were pleased. In a sense, Jesus comes to the Jordan River asking, "How am I doing?" Jesus is going to find out who is pleased with Him. And Jesus is going to very carefully choose where he stands.

Out there on the banks of the river, all sorts of people came to John for a life changing experience, a baptism of repentance. Other people came to John in order to criticize him, to question the need for such a baptism. They stood on heritage, and they put their weight on performance. Then, Jesus comes to the riverbank and look where he stands. It's not with the self-righteous religious people. Jesus stands with the sinners. Jesus wanted baptism like all the others who had come under the threat of God's wrath. At first, John wanted no part of this, and he had a point: in and of himself, Jesus had no need for this. But Jesus makes a point too: I will be baptized, because I have come to stand with sinners. I have come to be sin and shoulder the burden for everyone. This conversation ends with Jesus literally standing with sinners in the water of the Jordan.

Now some will say that Jesus has blown it, mixing with this crowd. They'll continue to tell him that along his three-year path. If Jesus asked them "How am I doing?" they'd be happy to offer their critique. But that's not the approval He's looking for. As soon as Jesus is baptized, as soon as He comes up out of the water, His Father stands with Him. The heavenly voice rings out, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." Not just anyone, but my Son. Not just pleased, but well pleased.

You can understand if the folks on the riverbank were stunned and confused. After all, there were all kinds of hopes and dreams for the Messiah, many of them quite extraordinary. Jesus, on the other hand, was ordinary. Whatever people thought about him that day, do you see what is happening here at the river? God the Father takes his stand with Jesus, the Jesus who takes His stand with sinners. Are you following that line of connection? Do you see how you are completely involved in this long-ago baptism?

It's simple, really. That day, when Jesus was baptized, God the Father took his stand with Jesus, the Jesus who takes his stand with sinners, which means Jesus takes his stand with you and me. You have hard evidence that God loves you and is well pleased with you. It's your baptism. This is the ongoing blessing of baptism in the life of a Christian believer.

It's like this: We are always looking for proof that God loves us, aren't we? We're always checking. But what are we looking at, and what are we checking on? Don't we

normally look at our life circumstances? Don't we usually say, well, work seems steady, and my health is pretty good, and my family is doing well, therefore, God must love me? Don't we do that, even if it is sort of subconscious? But do you know the danger in doing that? The danger is, what if work becomes a problem, or what if I don't have any? What if my health takes a nose dive, or my relationship falls apart? If you interpret your circumstances as the only signs of God's love for you, do you see what that will do to you? You'll be all over the place! You'll be on a roller coaster ride, and worse than that, when the circumstances don't fall in your favor, you'll begin to question, does God really love me? What's the use of following Him, if bad things can still happen to me? Have you ever wondered that? It's OK to say yes. I think we've all been there.

But this is the point: circumstances are the wrong place to look if you are looking for proof that God loves you. There is a better place to look. It's your baptism. Because you were baptized; because you were born again by water and the spirit; because you were adopted into God's family; because you were buried and raised with Christ in this water, this is what you can say. Do you know this? You can say, "Yes, I am going through a difficult time, but I am baptized. God is still standing at my side with his strength to hold me." "Yes, I am struggling with doubts and fears, but I am baptized, and if I'm baptized, I belong to God, and if I belong to God I know He's not going to abandon me." Do you know how to do this? Can you apply the gospel to yourself in this way? Can you say "Yes, I am facing a crisis; Yes, I am in a fight for my life; but I am baptized. Jesus stands with me. Because of Jesus, I know God loves me and is well pleased with me." The blessing of baptism is fully released in you only when you remember it and learn to rely on it. And you can. It's not impossible. You can learn to look past circumstances and to put all your weight on what God did for you in baptism. And when you do, look at the confidence that you gain. Look at the poise and the balance that become yours. Nothing can take this away from you! Nothing can change the fact that Jesus came to stand in the water with you, and God the Father looks at both of you and says, "You are my child, whom I love. I am well pleased with you." There's nothing for you to prove, nothing you have to perform. Jesus proved it. His performance was the only one that counts. And it was perfect. Never-ending love, strength to persevere and courage in the face of death are all poured into you. God stands with you.