

Grace and Peace be to you from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.

From Matthew, Chapter 3. But John tried to hinder Him, saying, “I have need to be baptized by You, and you are coming to me?” And answering, Jesus said to him, “Allow it now.”

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, have you ever sat in silence? Sometimes silence is a wonderful thing. When you have a house, a classroom, or an office full of chaos, sometimes we just long for a moment of solitude and silence. But other times, silence is not so welcomed. When we are experiencing grief or hardship, when we see evil seemingly unhindered affecting those we love and care for or enveloping the world around us, and we cry out for God to do something, the last thing we desire to hear is silence. When we look out, and the enemies of God are loud and strong, and God is weak and silent we can't help but wonder, but question, but doubt.

I share this because I fear we might be tempted to pat John the Baptizer on the head as we read the Gospel. You know how we do it, in a kind of condescending way with people who mean well but don't get it, who don't see things as we do. “There, there, John, I know you've got your views on Jesus. But don't you see, John? He's supposed to be a suffering servant. Don't you see? He's come to take the place of the people, as Isaiah 53 clearly indicates. There, there, John. Don't you see?”

I think John sees better than we do. Because, in a way, the Baptism of the Lord should be very difficult for us to appreciate. Very hard for us to adore. John sees what we casually overlook. What does he see? John sees the way things actually are. He has the eyes of a prophet of God. John sees the religious leaders of his people, who are no better than serpents. He sees the great mass of churchgoers of his day, and he knows they are deluded, deceiving themselves, and heading for judgment. John sees the world as it is. Broken, rebellious, and stained with filth.

What is our world like? We could go on and on, I suppose. We know it's a world in rebellion against God and that even we, although we have the first fruits of the Spirit, far too often participate in that rebellion. Do we *actually* see how strong and loud the evil is? In our own country, during the last year alone, fifty-one school shootings with 39 people killed and 101 injured, whom we quickly forget about. Fentanyl claimed more lives than COVID-19, motor vehicle accidents, cancer, and suicide together during the pandemic. Every year in the United States, 11,500 third-trimester abortions occur. With growing regularity, children are taken advantage of, and their bodies are mutilated.

Invisible Christendom, apostasy, skepticism, and idolatry rule in many seminaries and denominations under various labels: inclusive theology or historical studies. And they are leading people to hell. And in churches that still teach the right doctrine, the Missouri Synod, for instance, apathy reigns along with backbiting, suspicion, and indifference. Here in our own congregation, it's not hard to find idolatry or indifference or pettiness or whatever.

Do not pat John the Baptizer on the head. See the world the way he sees it. And if you do, you too will have trouble with the Baptism of Jesus. You see, because of the way the world is, one thing is crystal clear: God needs to do something. And what is even more clear is that God promised He would do something. And John knew that. John read his Bible. He knew the great hope of Israel. He knew the cry of Isaiah, “Oh, that you would sunder the heavens and come down.” God, come down and do something. Overthrow the evil! Reclaim your world! Do something! And now God has sundered the heavens. And He has come down to do something. But like this?

The water is filled with sin, the sin of all those sinners that went down into the water to be baptized. And God has come down, and all He does is get down there in the water with the sinners? Jesus' baptism means He has come to be baptized, baptized with the fire of God's judgment Himself. And that's all well and good, but can't God see? People are still dying. Evil is still strong, and it looks like it's winning. It really does. John was bothered by Jesus' baptism precisely because he could see. Jesus gets baptized, and nothing changes. Can we see? Weakness and lowliness and servitude aren't getting it

done. Evil is noisy. And God so often seems to be silent. John points his prophetic finger at his world and ours and says, “Look!” John has a problem with Jesus’ Baptism.

But God is not silent. Jesus speaks to John. “John, allow it now. I know that it’s hard. I know that it doesn’t look right. I know the evil better than you do. But John, allow it. Allow me to go the way of humility, the way of standing with sinners. The way of the cross. I know it’s strange, John. But you have to trust me. It’s God’s way, and so it’s fitting for me to go down with the sinners and stand with them. It’s the Father’s way. So it’s fitting for me to win by losing, to give you life by giving up mine.” And John allowed him.

Is this really God’s way? Look, the Spirit comes down upon him. He is Isaiah’s anointed servant. Look, the heavens are open to Him, and the Father’s voice speaks, “This is my beloved Son. With such a Son, I am well pleased.”

Dear friends, God’s way of dealing with sin and evil is through opposites. The opposite of what we think, and very often the opposite of what we want. In our better moments, we want evidence that God is being honored, that God’s will is being done, and that God’s reign is coming here on the earth as it is in heaven. And yes, from time to time, God might give us such visible evidence. But what He has chosen to do, and what He certainly will do, as He pleases, is to use a message about a man who conquered your sin by going down into it. A King who ruled by letting other people crucify him. A Master who calls all who follow Him to carry across and deny themselves and go out into the world to labor, even when it doesn’t look like God is doing a thing.

We cannot downplay the evil, and we must not try to force God’s hand to act in any way other than through the baptized and crucified Jesus and the Gospel about him. This is God’s Son. This is God’s way. This is the Gospel. And this is hard. How can I? How could you possibly enter into that kind of opposite living, into a life like that? You may do it today.

God, do something. Change me. Come into my life. Fill me. Do something. And He will. When you come up here, and you eat, and you drink, and you receive the death of Christ. And part of us says, “God, couldn’t You do it in some other way? Couldn’t you come in Your power and end all that ails us? Couldn’t you stop all that makes us suffer and grieves us?” And He knows it’s hard. But He says, “Allow it now. The day will come when I will act in power and bring my vengeance upon the world. But now, allow it. Allow my salvation. Allow my death. Allow my sacrifice for your sake, and trust My promise.”

The Spirit of God came upon Jesus and filled him. Jesus now pours out that same Spirit upon you and all believers. And only the Spirit of God can quiet our fear and cause us to hear and believe Jesus’ words, “Allow it. This is my way. Trust me to work in weakness and loneliness. Trust me to be there in the silence. Follow me into that life of service.”

Brothers and sisters, the Spirit is here now, offering you faith as you come to the table. Not to the silence, but to the voice of God for you. Amen.