

Welcome

In my early 20s, I lived in an area of the country where there was a strong pocket of a denomination that is obsessed with Biblical prophecy. One year, pretty much everyone in my city got the same weird flier in our mailboxes. This wasn't the exact one, but it was pretty close.

Being both a pastor and a theology student, I couldn't resist going one night. And it was amazing. But amazing in the way a movie like *Suicide Squad* is amazing, in that while you're watching it, you're thinking, "I can't believe how utterly, truly awful this is - and at the same time, they put in a *lot* of work on this. But it is a total dumpster fire.

And, as you might have guessed, the whole thing was a gospel presentation, so it ended with inviting people to ask Jesus into their hearts. The whole thing was so bizarre and confusing, I can only imagine their hope was either to overwhelm us as an audience and hope we convert because we're confused, or maybe they hoped to scare us to Jesus with all the fire and brimstone.

Either way, I walked away frowning, because nothing they shared was very good news. If you were with us last week, you remember that we saw the word Gospel means good news.

Today, we're going to revisit the reality that far too often, the way we talk about Jesus just doesn't sound like very good news. We make him abstract, reduce him to theological concepts. But the truth is, Jesus is good news in large part because he's personal to each of us. And when we really engage Jesus' good news on a personal, intimate level, sharing Jesus with others in our lives isn't a burden. It's a privilege and a blessing!

Message

We're in the Church season of Epiphany, the season that follows Christmas. Epiphany celebrates the God came not just for us, but for the whole world. Appropriately, then, our Epiphany series this year is called Good News for a Change. We're talking about how to talk about Jesus... with anyone. The \$20 word for this is Evangelism, and it's a word with enough baggage to make just about anyone break out in a nervous sweat. Whether you've been preached at or sat through those classes on how to preach at people, Evangelism conjures to mind that combative, confrontational, in-your-face kind of approach, or maybe just having no idea how to talk about Jesus with people we really care about.

Throughout this series, we're going to explore a lot of the ways we get Evangelism wrong, and why it's a lot more fun than we would've imagined. We began last week by talking about what the Gospel even is. So indulge me in a thought experiment: If I asked you to make a list of what the Gospel is, what would be the top 2-3 things on your list?

[pause]

A lot of us would probably list things like, "Jesus died for our sins" or "God loves us" or "Jesus is God." Good stuff. True stuff.

Now, another question: Why is Jesus good *news for you*?

[pause] You might have some of the same answers as above, but I bet you get a lot more specific, too. You say things like, "Jesus saved my marriage" or "Jesus was with me as I battled my addiction" or "Jesus helped me be a better father" or "Jesus teaches me where my worth really comes from."

Now here's the funny thing: like we talked about last week, the word 'Gospel' means Good News. SO why do our two lists look so different? Why is it so hard for us to make the Gospel personal?

And maybe more to the point, what happens if we take the Gospel writers literally when they say their message about Jesus is Good News? What does it mean to say Jesus' good news is good news for ME... and good news for YOU?

That's a good question - and one I want to answer with another question:

Why did Jesus get baptized?

(I know... what?!)

[Scripture slide] Turn with me to Luke 3. This is near the beginning of Luke's Gospel - it's almost the first thing that happens after Jesus is born. And Jesus' baptism is really, really important. It's one of only a handful of events that all four Gospels report - up there with Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Even Jesus' *birth* is only in 2 of the 4 Gospels.

So something about this baptism must be really good news.

Baptism was a ritual Jewish people did to represent repentance. The word picture was that you were washing the old way off and emerging clean, ready to walk a new path. This fits with what Jesus' cousin John was doing - he was preparing the way for Jesus, the Messiah, and he was doing that by calling people to repent. So they came to the Jordan river and let John baptize them to represent that they were done with their sin and ready to welcome God's messiah.

In fact, people liked John so much they started to wonder if he was the Messiah. So John has to set them straight:

Everyone was expecting the Messiah to come soon, and they were eager to know whether John might be the Messiah. John answered their questions by saying, "I baptize you with water; but someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I'm not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He is ready to separate the chaff from the wheat with his winnowing fork. Then he will clean up the threshing area, gathering the wheat into his barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire..."

Cool. But... why did JESUS get baptized? Jesus was sinless. Jesus was the Messiah.

If Jesus is the greater, if John is unworthy even to untie Jesus' sandals, then why did Jesus let John baptize him?

Since the earliest days, Christians have found Jesus' baptism to be good news precisely because he *didn't* need to be baptized. The Baptism is Jesus' ultimate act of solidarity. John came threatening a separation of wheat and chaff, and a judge with a winnowing fork... but that judge showed up on the banks and walked down into the waters of baptism.

If he had come separating and winnowing, come judging, then it would've been Jesus on one side and all the rest of us on the other. But he didn't. He embraced us in our sin. He understood that to be born human is to be born into a broken world, to know sin from before we could really know anything. And rather than judge us, he stands with us.

The reason Jesus' baptism has been such good news since it happened is because it's both cosmic and personal. God entered into a world of oppression and injustice, a world that bends us away from God from the day we're born. And Jesus didn't just get close enough to see it - Jesus became fully human, completely one of us.

But then there's this beautiful moment after his baptism that brings his baptism into an intense, individual focus:

21 One day when the crowds were being baptized, Jesus himself was baptized. As he was praying, the heavens opened, and the Holy Spirit, in bodily form, descended on him like a dove. And a voice from heaven said, "You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy." -- Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

God speaks to Jesus. God calls Jesus his dearly loved son, and insists that Jesus brings him great joy.

Here's what we miss about the good news: it's not just about Jesus. It's from Jesus *for* us. And this baptismal moment is meant to recall for each of us our own baptismal moments. Because it is in those moments God looks at us and says, "You are my dearly loved child, and you bring me great joy."

Friends, if the Good News doesn't start right here, with an affirmation that before anything else, we are God's precious child, and we bring God great joy, then it's not going to end up being good news.

What brings you joy in life? When do those moments happen that cause you to quit thinking about your life and just enjoy it?

Maybe it's a moment with your kids, or with your spouse or partner.

Or around a table, playing games with friends, when the warmth and joy of connection spills over and you find yourself smiling for no good reason.

Or at a concert of one of your favorite artists, right at that moment when the music swells and the crowd is singing along and there're a hundred or a thousand hands all raised in the air and the music in that moment makes you part of something bigger than yourself.

Or when you get away from the city and the burbs and you're walking along a trail and the air is crisp and fresh

We all experience moments when the reality of the world becomes more evident, when the goodness and beauty that is at the heart of the universe becomes evident.

That is the experience of joy. A priest told me once to hold onto that feeling for a moment. Hold onto the joy. And then recognize that this is exactly how God feels every time God looks at us.

When God beholds us, God experiences pure joy. This is, in part, the meaning of Jesus' baptism. When we are baptized into the Church, we share in this moment.

Not that baptism is what makes God love us. God always loves us, and God always feels joy when God considers us.

But in the baptismal moment, we are reminded that we belong to God, that God feels pure joy for us.

If we'll rest there, we'll discover the good news: that we are loved, that God calls us his beloved children, and that we bring God great joy.

It's no accident that this baptism is the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He's thirty-something years old at this point. He has been working as a carpenter, contributing to his household.

And then this moment happens. God speaks to him: you are my beloved child. You bring me great joy.

And Jesus knows his time has come. His work is grounded wholly in God's love for him, in his identity as God's child.

So too for us. We all walk different paths to God. The good news that draws us is so varied. But we all come to the same love, the same God who is overjoyed with us. We all enter into the same waters of baptism as children of the same God.

The good news for me was pretty simple. I was a kid raised in a loving church by loving parents. I was constantly surrounded by people who told me God loved me, and I *believed* them because *they* loved me. So when they invited me to trust my life to God forever, I didn't hesitate. I wasn't afraid of hellfire, I

wasn't weeping as I repented of deep, dark sins (I was 7, and still grumpy about apologizing to my siblings, but that was about it).

But as I grew up, I needed to come back to that baptismal moment, when I was marked as God's child. I got insecure as I got older, and started trying to prove I was worthy of love - to God, to other people, to myself. If I could get better grades, work harder, prove I was smarter, then maybe I would be good enough.

But of course that was never going to happen, because the good news for me is that God's love for me isn't based on my ability to perform. God called me a beloved child long before I could form a single word. God was overjoyed with me from the first moment of my existence, and nothing I do can ever change that.

That's what the waters of baptism remind me of.

What about you? What is the good news for you about Jesus? How do you need to remember that you are God's beloved child, and that God is overjoyed by you?

Communion + Remembering Baptism

[Communion Slide] Come to the table, receive God's love and remember you are God's beloved child!

Assignment + Blessing

Make a list of reasons Jesus is good news in your life!