



Sermon, January 12, 2020  
Rev. Dr. Craig S. Pesti-Strobel  
Cottage Grove and Junction City  
United Methodist Churches

Sermon Series: Reboot! JP21

## “Baptizma – Jump in!”

### Scripture: Matthew 3:1-17

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, <sup>2</sup>“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”<sup>3</sup> This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.’”

<sup>4</sup> Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup> Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, <sup>6</sup> and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

<sup>7</sup> But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Bear fruit worthy of repentance. <sup>9</sup> Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>10</sup> Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

<sup>11</sup> “I baptize you in water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with <sup>12</sup> the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

<sup>13</sup> Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. <sup>14</sup> John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” <sup>15</sup> But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. <sup>16</sup> And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. <sup>17</sup> And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

### Opening: New Year, New Start

Here it is January 12<sup>th</sup>. It is hard to believe that we are already two weeks into this new year. How many of you have already broken any New Year’s Resolutions? How many of you resolved a long time ago not to make New Year’s resolutions? I’m with you. I’m terrible at keeping

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resolutions. I’ve heard that at the beginning of every new year, fitness centers get a huge number of sign-ups, but by the end of January, they are back down to their regular patrons. We seem to be much more proficient at making resolutions than we are at keeping them.

Nonetheless, the idea of making a new start in life is compelling. Think of the various roads in life that you’ve taken that just ended up nowhere. I have a friend who says that a dead end is just another place to turn around. You know, the Bible doesn’t condemn dead-ends. It just says, “Turn around!”

The path of Jesus begins with turning around. In the Bible, the word for this is “repent.” Let’s look at what John the Baptizer had to say about it. In today’s reading from Matthew, John says, “I baptize you in water for repentance” It doesn’t say, “John was baptizing after the people repented.” In the Gospel of Mark, it says that John practiced a baptism of repentance. Let’s pause a moment and look at that word, “baptism.”

The original Greek word, *baptizma*, means to immerse. It has the same sense and uses of the English word, immerse. For instance, have you ever immersed yourself in a good book? You were baptizing yourself in a that book. It doesn’t mean “to dunk somebody in water.” It simply means to immerse. But, I do have to say, there is something powerfully dramatic about being immersed in water. I remember when I was young, my mom taking us to swimming lessons. But I could just never get the hang of things. I didn’t like putting my head in the water, and the whole stroke, turn your head, take a breath, stroke thing just wasn’t going to happen. Several summers went by like this. Then finally, one summer at Boy Scout camp, we were at Warm Lake in Idaho, and I was taking swimming lessons along the lakeshore. I finally plunged myself in the water and glided along the bottom for about three seconds. But it was amazing! I felt the power of the water all around me, I felt like a fish, and suddenly the whole swimming mystery was solved. Total immersion in the experience changed everything.

This is what John is talking about. New life doesn’t happen by just wishing for it. You have to jump in, full-bodied.

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John is talking about a life immersed in the power and presence of God. Water immersion symbolizes this. Jesus will come to immerse them in the power of the Spirit. John is all about preparing for this immersion in the Spirit. We have to prepare ourselves for this. How? By *telling the truth* about our lives – confessing our sins – and how off the mark we are, how off-path we have wandered, how lost and confused, how injured and hurt, how self-centered and hurtful we are. John preaches a baptism of repentance – an immersion in this self-examination, telling the truth, and starting over.

Now we need to pause once again and look at the next word, “repentance.” The original Greek is based on the word *metanoia*, which literally means to change one’s mind, to change the direction of one’s mind, and thus one’s life. In fact, *metanoia* also translates as “beyond the (normal) mind,” and the force of the verb indicates going beyond our normal consciousness or way of thinking into a deeper, bigger mind, the “mind of Christ” is what Paul calls it in Philippians. *Metanoia*, or repentance, then, means redirecting our lives from our small self-centered minds into the bigger mind of God. John preached about immersing oneself in repentance, or *metanoia*.

John says Jesus will come to immerse us in the power of the Holy Spirit. So, then along comes Jesus down the River Jordan to meet John. Now, if you are like me, you probably ask, “Why did Jesus have to repent?” But remember, *metanoia* means to move into a bigger mind in order to start over, and Jesus comes to symbolically demonstrate that he embraces this bigger mind of God. In essence, he is embracing his divine nature, and his divine mission to show us a path to God. And what happens next blows everything away, and people listening to this story in Matthew’s time would have been blown away.

Jesus goes down in the water to show the world that he is ready embrace the bigger mind of God. He wades in the water with John. And then listen to Matthew’s words: “And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.”

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In Matthew, the verb used that is translated as “were opened,” is the same verb used in such contexts as:

- Matthew 2:11 – “Then, *opening* their treasures,” (you can guess who this refers to)
- Matthew 5:2 – “He *opened* His mouth and taught them...”
- Matthew 7:7&8 – “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door *will be opened* for you. <sup>8</sup> For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door *will be opened*.”
- Matthew 9:30 – “And their eyes *were opened*.”
- Acts 16:26 – “Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors *were opened* and everyone’s chains were unfastened.”

The idea and sense behind this word is that of something that has been closed or hidden, and is inaccessible to us is suddenly opened, revealed, made accessible. And the particular conjugation of this verb in this context is passive, i.e., something acts upon the heavens or the door to open it. We do not open it (and of course, it doesn’t open itself). This is important, because it indicates that there is a change in the state of things. What has formerly been closed off, shut tight, unreachable, inaccessible is now being opened up, becoming reachable, attainable, accessible.

This is what happened to Jesus and what he came to do: open heaven to us. Not after death, but now. The path of Jesus is nothing less than a path into a bigger mind, an expanded consciousness, the metanoia John preaches. Our minds literally have to be changed. But this is no easy task. Anyone trying to escape the clutches of addiction or trying to heal from an abusive upbringing, or recover from PTSD knows that “changing one’s mind” is not like changing the sheets or changing one’s clothes. It actually entails changing the very quality and content of one’s mind, and

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changing the configuration of the neurons in the brain. It involves developing a new mode of thinking and perceiving the world. It involves literally an expansion of consciousness. Paul called it having the mind of Christ, Jesus called it the Kingdom or Realm of Heaven (or God) that is within us and in our midst. This is what Jesus came to help humanity realize and develop into. But there are a lot of things that have to be deconstructed, taken apart, disassembled, in order to be rebuilt and reconfigured in our mental landscape. This is the work of the Spirit within us. And that is what Jesus immerses us in – the power of the Holy Spirit. And this transforms us. It transforms our direction in life, it transforms our focus in life, it transforms the world around us by the things we do, and it transforms our very reality.

In the 65<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah, God says, “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.” Jesus saw those heavens being opened up, and felt the holy power of those heavens poured out upon him. And he pours out the same Holy Spirit power upon you. Every one of you. We can all start over. No dead ends. Just new life.

That is what the Jesus Path for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is all about. Come follow Jesus, and find out what it’s all about.