

The Baptism of Jesus

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Date: 11 January 2026

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 0 0] And the core meaning of baptism. Because depending on where you come from, different people have different ways and associations and ways of making meaning or thinking about baptism. I would say the question of identity is a universal one.

Especially if you live in the postmodern West where we are veritably obsessed with the search for identity. And there is an inexhaustible supply of people with strong opinions about where we should look to figure out our identity.

If you're from a more traditional or communal culture, most people would point you in the direction of the people around you. They would say, well, you're really meant to find your identity in your tribe or your family or your traditions, your people group.

That's where you look. If you've grown up in the West, you're pointed in the opposite direction. Right? In the postmodern West, the worst thing you could possibly do is to look to some outside source to tell you who you are.

So if you let your family tell you who you are or some set of social norms or your religion, then you're a sellout, essentially. And the only way we can really know who we really are is to look inward and to analyze our feelings and our desires and our impulses.

[1 : 3 7] And that's really the source of identity. It's interesting. I was with some people from our church over this weekend and we were just sharing our stories. And one person in our church talked about what it was like to grow up part of her life in a more traditional communal culture and then to move to the highly individualistic culture of East Coast U.S.

and the shift in identity for her. Going from a place where you found identity by kind of blending in and conforming to the people around you and moving to a place where you really needed to be individual and unique and make sure that you stand out.

And that was profoundly disoriented. None of these ways of getting at identity actually deliver what they promise. And that's what we're going to look at this morning. The gospel offers something entirely different.

An identity that is not found by conformity and it's not found by looking within. It's an identity that can only be received from Jesus Christ and sealed in baptism.

So that's what we're looking at. We're looking at Matthew chapter 3, the story of Jesus' baptism. So we're going to see the crisis of identity, how Jesus restores identity, and what that means for us.

[2 : 5 2] Let's pray. Our Lord and Heavenly Father, we thank you this morning for the fact that you are here and you are doing your ministry in our midst. We thank you that you love us, you love Patrick, that what we're about to celebrate in this baptism is all a response to your initiating love.

And we pray that in that love, you would make your word understandable to us. And that more than that, you would do your work in us through your word. We pray this in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

So first of all, friends, I want to talk a little bit about the crisis of identity. Why is there this search to begin with? In our passage, we meet a man named John. John is a renowned prophet.

He lives in the desert. And John's message is essentially boiled down to one core soundbite that he repeats again and again. He calls people to do two things, to repent and be baptized.

Repent and be baptized. One of the problems with the word repent is I think when we hear the word repent, we often think only of behavioral change. What is John really preaching?

[4 : 01] He's saying, stop doing the bad things, get your act together, start doing good things. That's repent. Stop the bad things, start the good things. And that's honestly what you find in a lot of religions around the world, different versions of that message.

These things are bad. These things are good. Stop doing these things and start doing these things. But John, we need to understand, isn't just talking about changing behavior. His message is really about changing our very identity.

To repent is to stop living out of a false identity. It's to abandon your old way of life and the identity that it's rooted in.

Because what the Bible would say is that all of our behavior is downstream from our identity. Whatever defines us, that is what leads to all the ways that we live, good or bad.

So to repent is to abandon an old identity and then to be baptized is to put on a new identity, a true identity. This is why the Apostle Paul, regularly in his letters, refers to Christian conversion as a putting off of the old self and a putting on of the new self.

[5 : 22] So why would we need a new identity? What's the problem? Well, what is identity? Identity. I heard one person say, and I think this is a great way of thinking about it, identity is composed essentially of two things.

Your identity, my identity, two things. A sense of self and a sense of worth. By sense of self, I mean what sits at the core of you, underneath all the hats that you wear, underneath all the roles that you play, and the various spheres that you operate in, what remains true about you and does not change no matter what?

What's at your core? That's the sense of self. And then along with that, where does your sense of worth come from? What gives you significance? What makes you confident of your value as a human being?

So those two things together, sense of self, sense of worth, that's your identity. And what Scripture teaches us is that we were made in the image of our creator, of a God who made us.

And what that means is that we're meant to find our identity in Him. Right? We have His image. And so that's the thing that's meant to define us, is our relationship to Him.

[6 : 38] It raises the question, what happens when we stop doing that? What happens when, at some point, human beings said, we don't want to be defined by you, we don't want to live for you, we want to live for ourselves.

In fact, we kind of want to be like our own gods. What happens when we cast off that source of identity that we're meant to have? Well, inevitably, we have to start looking for identity somewhere else.

And that's exactly what we see happening all through history and all around the world. Because the truth is, as we have discovered, much to our chagrin, almost anything can become a source of identity if we let it.

Almost anything can give us a sense of self and a sense of worth if we let it. So a lot of us look for areas in which we have to perform.

Right? So identity can be very performative. So things that we do. Most people come to D.C. because they want to advance in their career somehow, whether it's through education, internship, fellowship, residency, or some sort of career path that we're on, which is great.

[7 : 45] And there's a lot of impressive people doing impressive things. But it's easy in a place like D.C. for career to become a sense of identity for us. I am what I do.

I have value and significance because of what I do. Some people, myself not included, look to their athletic ability and say, you know, I was a college athlete.

I thought about going pro. And for much of your life, that's all you focused on. Your friends were out playing and partying and you were at practice all the, you know, 6 a.m. every day, you were up, you were practicing all the time.

And it comes to define you. Who are you? Well, I'm a basketball player. I'm a football player. I'm a baseball player. That's what I am. That's what gives me value. Some people look to their intelligence.

They're the smartest person in the room. Right? They're the one with the answer. Some people look to their competence. Some of us define ourselves according to the values that we hold.

[8 : 44] Right? So that's why our political views and affiliations can become such a powerful source of identity. I'm defined by the way I think and I'm connected to the, and validated by the other people who agree with me.

Sometimes we're partially defined by the roles that we play. You know, we just came out of the holidays. I don't know if you've ever experienced this. When you go home and you visit your family of origin and maybe you've been living somewhere else as a grown-up adult for 20 years and you go back and you spend time with your family of origin and all of a sudden, it's like you were sucked back into that role that you haven't played for 15 or 20 years.

None of your friends think of you as that person but you go back home and all of a sudden, you're that person again. You get pulled into that old family system and it's like they're forcing a hat on you that hasn't fit for a long time.

But it's because the family system needs you to play that role and that's who you are. That's your identity. Right? And so we can play lots of roles as parents or as siblings or as kids. You know, we can be helpers.

We can be rescuers. We can be the golden child. We can be the perpetual victim. What defines us? What gives us a sense of identity, meaning, value?

[10 : 00] It can be almost anything if we let it. Here's the question. I want you to think about your own life. What are the things that you look to and say, that tells me who I am and that tells me that I matter?

Because I guarantee you, you're going to find stuff and it's not going to just be one thing. It's going to be probably some combination of everything I just said. The point for this morning, though, friends, is that anything we look to to give us a sense of self and a sense of worth other than God is doomed to failure.

It is unsustainable. It will not last for at least two reasons. Number one, if we look to something other than God for identity, our sense of self will always be fragile.

It will always be fragile. When we root our identity in anything other than God, then we end up basing our sense of self and worth on something that is impermanent.

It means it will eventually be taken away from us. So we have to live with the perpetual insecurity of knowing that the things that we are relying on for our self and worth, we could lose them at any point.

[11 : 18] And that creates a profound sense of instability. So recently, we've gone through a couple of hard years with the government, people who work for the government, and all the changes in the government, which means a lot of people have lost their jobs.

So many of us know, and at some point, even if it didn't happen even in the last year or two, it's happened to many of us at some point, you have a job that you think you can count on, that's stable, that you kind of like, and you're pretty good at, and all of a sudden, for reasons outside of your control, you lose it.

It's taken away from you. Now, some people can survive that. Other people, it just crushes them because you realize, I really came to look to that to give me a sense of self and a sense of worth.

And without that, I don't know who I am anymore. It's one of the hardest things about losing your job unexpectedly is that you have to go through a whole period of asking, who am I? I don't know who I am anymore.

If part of your identity is wrapped up in being attractive, what happens is we age and we no longer conform to the beauty standards of the culture that we live in, right?

[12 : 22] And you do a little Botox and you do a little work here and there and you start, you know, take a GLP and you kind of do what you can. But eventually, you have to realize, as the time passes, I conform less and less to the standards of my society.

I'm trying to say it diplomatically. What happens? Like, for some people, it's like, okay, I'm going to embrace aging. I'm going to go gray. It's going to be fine. The muffin top, I'm not going to worry about that.

Other people, there's a sense that my very worth as a human being is draining out of me. And I'm not actually knocking. That's really hard.

If you feel that, it's like, who am I now that I'm not beautiful? Now that people, now that when I'm out in public, I'm not turning heads, who am I? If part of our identity and self-worth is tied up in our parents' approval, what happens when we get older and maybe we come to a different set of convictions politically or spiritually?

You know, some of you grew up in homes and now you, your politics are very different from your parents or your family, right? That used to fit in because you agreed with their politics and now you're in a very different place.

[13 : 31] Some of you grew up in non-Christian homes and now you've come to faith and your family thinks you're crazy? And what happens when you start making decisions and those decisions don't line up with what your parents believe and value and affirm and you realize that they no longer approve of your choices?

What happens then? But for you, your parents' approval is a huge source of value and meaning and worth and you have to navigate that. Who am I now? What am I now now that I don't have that, right?

So if you are basing your sense of identity on anything other than God, it's going to be impermanent which is going to mean that your identity is very fragile. So identity then becomes something that we have to perform and we have to construct something that we have to achieve and something that we have to maintain all the time and it takes a lot of energy to do it.

That's the first reason why it's not sustainable. Number two reason why it's not sustainable to search for identity anywhere else is that our sense of self will not only be fragile, it will be fragmented because when you start rooting your identity in anything other than God, very quickly you will find yourself pulled in lots of different directions.

One of my favorite European cultural observers, Václav Havel, who I quote from time to time, former president of the Czech Republic, had this great analogy of saying it's like playing for a bunch of different sports teams and each has its own jersey, right, and you're constantly swapping jerseys and every team is saying we are really your team and all these other teams are not your team so you feel like you're getting pulled.

[15 : 07] Whose team do you really play for? Who are you really? And that's what it feels like. So you end up having a version of yourself that comes out at work. You have a version of yourself that comes out around your family, maybe a different version that comes out around your family of origin.

You have a version of yourself that gets amplified around your DC friends, a version of yourself that comes out around your Christian church friends. It's weird when you have a gathering like a wedding or something where all those friends get together and all of a sudden you realize that different people see you very differently and who am I really?

The point is none of these things can bear the weight of human identity. They were never designed to. How does Jesus restore our identity? How does Jesus offer us something better than the constant cobbling together of fragile sources of self and worth?

Here's where we go with this passage. John, as we said, he's out preaching. He's also baptizing people. And then he sees Jesus. And Jesus does something totally unexpected.

Jesus asks John to be baptized by John. And John's very obviously confused by this because Jesus is God's perfect sinless son.

[16 : 28] John's baptism is a baptism for sinners. This is for people who know they're sinful to go into the waters to renew their covenant with God, to be cleansed and to be made right with God, put right with God.

And John is looking at Jesus. He's like, you don't need to be cleansed of anything. You don't need to repent of anything. If anything, he says, I should be baptized by you, Jesus. But Jesus insists, and what does he say?

He says, let it be so now for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness. Now, we know because I just said a minute ago he's not a sinner.

There's no sin. That he doesn't mean by fulfill all righteousness, he doesn't mean I need to be made righteous. He means in order to fulfill righteousness. And this is a way of him saying, God has enacted a plan that has been unfolding for centuries to heal humanity and put the world right.

And what I'm about to do, what I'm asking you to do for me is a crucial step in that plan. In order to fulfill that plan, John, I need you to baptize me.

[17 : 37] when Jesus is baptized, we begin to see the real reason that he came. Jesus did not come to judge humanity.

Jesus came to identify with humanity. So instead of getting up on the hillside, so John's up here, you need to repent and be baptized, and the sinners are all down here. Everybody would expect somebody like Jesus to come up on the hillside, say, John, why don't you take a break and take over?

Everybody needs to repent, come be baptized, right? But Jesus doesn't come up on the hill and start preaching to the sinners. Jesus goes down and takes his place among the sinners. What do we do with that?

Jesus doesn't heal us by telling us to get our act together. Jesus heals us by trading places with us.

He takes our old identity on himself, right? So sinners who've rebelled against God, he takes that identity on himself and then he endures the punishment meant for us, right, on the cross.

[18 : 56] And then what he does is he offers his identity in exchange as God's only begotten righteous son. So here is the gospel in a nutshell.

Jesus becomes like us so that we can become like him. It's a completely different way of offering hope and salvation to the world.

Jesus becomes like us so that we can become like him. And you say, well, what does it mean to become like Jesus? Well, we get a clue right after, as Jesus is being baptized, immediately after, it says, the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him.

And behold, a voice from heaven said, this is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased. To become like Jesus is to know that if you're a baptized follower of Jesus, God speaks those same words over you every moment of every day of your life.

Everywhere you are, everything that you do, at the height of your greatest successes, at the depth of your worst, most shameful failures, the only words God is speaking to you are those words.

[20 : 21] This is my beloved child in whom I am well pleased. Over and over and over, Jesus says, here's that identity, this is the identity that I want you to have, this is the identity you were made to have.

We said earlier that our identity is made up of both a sense of self and a sense of worth. I want you to understand that we find both of those things in the words of God the Father.

Where can you find a sense of self that is so stable that you never have to worry about it slipping away? A sense of self that can remain regardless of what circumstances you find yourself in, what hats you wear, what roles you play.

you have to receive it. You come to Jesus. You allow God to name you as His child. So if you're a Christian, you allow God to name you and then you know from that moment on you are a son or a daughter of the King.

That's your identity. Right? And that remains true no matter what. That remains true regardless of how you feel. It may not feel true.

[21 : 40] Who cares? It is. It remains true no matter what role you play. So in all circumstances, no matter what else might change in your life, the thing that is most true about you is that you are a son or daughter of the King.

And then it gives us a profound sense of worth because we see in these words that God delights when He looks at you. God delights when He beholds His children.

And the great thing about that delight and love is it's not the kind of love that you need to earn or maintain by holding on to God's approval. It's the kind of love that flows freely from God into your life as a gift.

And because you didn't earn it and because you don't deserve it, you can't lose it. If you didn't do anything to get it, you can't do anything to lose it. When you know deep down that you are beloved by God, that gives you an unshakable and inexhaustible source of worth and value.

And here's what that does. It protects you from the highs and the lows. Right? If your source of worth is based in God's free gift of love for you, then even if you are wildly successful, you're never going to be tempted to become smug or cocky or look down on those little people who never made it.

[23 : 05] Right? Because your worth isn't wrapped up in your success. It comes as a gift from God. And on the other hand, when you face your worst failures imaginable, it's not going to crush you because your worth is not wrapped up in your failure.

It comes as a gift from God. So this is how Jesus heals our identity. Being a Christian is not about being a better person. It's allowing Jesus to trade places with you.

It's taking on a new identity. So last question we want to ask this morning, what does this mean for us, those of us gathered here?

At the end of Matthew's gospel, and this is kind of looking ahead past our passage to the end of Matthew's gospel, after his death and resurrection, Jesus sends out his disciples into the world and he tells them, go and make disciples of all nations, that means everybody, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

He's saying, go out into the world and tell everybody you meet that there is a way that is made open to the world. There is a way now to have your true identity restored.

[24 : 15] There's a way for you to become who God created you to be. You no longer have to look for that. The way is open. The answer is here. All you have to do is receive it.

And in many ways, I think that, friends, this captures the whole mission of the church. church, this is why we're here. This is why we're excited to have a permanent location in a neighborhood like Shaw.

This is why we show up. It's because this proclamation is going out to the world and there are many, many, many people who need to hear it and many, many, many people who need to be reminded of it.

Everything we do, and by we, I mean the church, everything we do is aimed at healing and restoring human identity. Everything that we do is aimed at healing and restoring human identity.

So it's about seeing men and women rehumanized by becoming what God created them to be, which is his children. And friends, this is especially true of baptism.

[25 : 18] When we see Patrick baptized this morning, who is going to go get ready right now for baptism, I think, when Patrick comes up here in a little while and we baptize Patrick, what we're really doing is we are speaking his true name over him.

We're saying, this is who you are, son. You are God's beloved child. And that is the most true thing that anybody will ever say about that child is that you're a child of God and he delights him.

We're declaring what is true about him. Now why is that important? Because remember, what happens just after Jesus is baptized? The very next verse says he goes out into the wilderness and what happens?

Immediately, Satan begins to challenge and question his identity. And that continues to happen, not just in the wilderness, but for the rest of Jesus' ministry all the way up to when he is hanging on the cross and they're sneering and they're mocking and they're saying, if you're really the son of God, if you're really the king, come down off that cross.

The entire time Jesus is on earth, his identity is under constant attack. And friends, the same is true for us. From the moment that child is baptized, from the moment you are baptized, for the rest of your life, your identity will be under constant attack.

[26 : 39] Everybody wants a piece of you because if you can tell somebody who they are, you can control them. And whether you're a good advertising agency, a good political advocacy group, or Satan himself, everybody wants a piece of you.

So they want to define you. This is why we need the church. It is not enough just to get baptized and say, well now we've checked that box, go do what you want, go to church.

This is why when we baptize a child, we want to make sure the parents are followers of Jesus and we want to make sure that those parents are actively participating in our church or in a church if it's not our church.

Because you need the church to constantly remind you who you truly are. And what do I mean by that? I mean this. I mean number one, we need the scriptures constantly preached and taught in our lives to tell us who we are.

Here is where it says you're a beloved child of God. We need the sacraments, baptism, and the Eucharist. What do those do? Those give us ways of sharing in the identity and sharing in the life of Christ, strengthening our identity in Him.

[27 : 59] Every time you receive the Eucharist, Christ offers His life to you to build that identity up in you. We need ways of embodying the gospel story that shape our identity.

How do we do that? That's the whole point of the liturgy. That's the whole point of the prayers and the singing. It's to enter into and embody the story of the gospel. So much of our sense of our identity comes from stories.

So we come here to be restored by being re-storied. We are re-storied through the liturgy. As we hear of our sin, as we confess, as we hear absolution, as we receive Christ.

And finally, we need a community people who have the good combination of love and guts who will push back and challenge and question if we start going off that path and veering into another identity.

You need those people in your life. Unfortunately, in our culture, so many people are so thin-skinned. And so many people in the church, quite frankly, are so thin-skinned and so prone to take offense that we are so offended when people push back on our life choices.

[29 : 15] And I would say, if we're not doing that, we're really abdicating our responsibility and our spiritual friendships. You know, we live in this world where when somebody says who they are, that's like an unassailable thing that it's like an absolute truth.

That is absolutely bogus. That is the worst possible way to live as a society. You know, a few years ago, the story came out, maybe some of you read it, about a woman named Kira Bell.

And Kira Bell began identifying as a boy around age 14. And she was medically transitioned as a teenager, hormone treatment, puberty blockers, and later, double mastectomy.

Later, she realized it had all been a huge mistake. She detransitioned, but her body has lasting permanent damage that's been done to it as a result of the medical interventions. But as she got older, she looked back and she realized that her distress actually came from the fact that she was depressed.

She was anxious. She did not fit in with her friends. She didn't like stereotypically girly things. She was going through puberty, which was really hard for her, and she had no one to talk to to help her understand what was happening to her body.

[30 : 26] So, the reason I'm bringing it up is in 2020, she won a landmark lawsuit against the doctors who led her down that path. And what she said is essentially this. She said, I went to that clinic expecting for people to ask me questions and to challenge me and to help me make sure that this was the right decision for me.

But she said, from the minute I walked in that clinic, nobody challenged me. Nobody questioned me. They uncritically, unquestioningly affirmed me as a boy from the moment I walked in the door. And she says, I couldn't find an institution or an organization anywhere where anyone would ask any questions.

She said, everybody simply affirmed me as a boy and before I knew it, I was on the path. And it's heartbreaking if you read her story because she says, I wish that people had challenged me because if they had, I wouldn't have to live with the consequences of the choices I made.

You know, the point, friends, is whatever it is that is pulling at us and trying to tell us who we are, it shouldn't be the case that there are no institutions out there where you will ever be challenged to their questions.

That may be true elsewhere. But I just want to make clear, you should come to church expecting people to call you back to what is most true about you.

[31 : 45] You should expect to come to church and have people who are going to push back when you begin to be pulled away from that truth. Right? When you start getting too wrapped up in your career or too wrapped around the axle of your, you know, politics, right, you should come to church expecting that people are going to say, I think this has become too important for you.

You know, you need to come back to Christ. You are not your career. You are not your accomplishments. You are not your failures.

You are not your shame. You're a beloved child of God. You are not your feelings and desires. You're not the names that people have called you or the false accusations they've made about you.

You're not a victim. You're not defined by the things that have been done to you or the harm that has been committed against you. You're a beloved child of God.

Every time we gather together, that is the message I pray you take with you into the world. And every time you forget, come on back and you'll hear it again.

[33 : 04] Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your goodness. We thank you that through an unfathomable mystery across thousands and thousands of years, you enacted a plan involving thousands of people, thousands of years, cultures near and far.

and that plan unfolded leading all the way to this moment when we could simply open our mouths and call you Father. And Lord, we pray that whatever else may seem or feel to be true at any given moment, the thing that is most true for us here is that we would know beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are your beloved children.

And we pray this that we might glorify you by living and being what we are created for. in Jesus' name. Amen.