

“Let Yourself Be Loved”

Matthew 3:1-17

Series: Follow Week 1. Beloved

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The Jordan River. You’ve probably heard about it since Sunday School. Some babies are baptized in water brought back from the Holy Land. In fact, you can buy 3.4 ounces of Authentic Holy Water from the Jordan River on Amazon Prime for \$8.97 with free shipping. It’s lightly scented with the fragrance of Holy Land flowers to eliminate staleness and keep freshness. I once brought back Jordan River water in an empty soda bottle. It turned out to be true “living water.” That’s because something living started growing in it. I eventually poured it out to prevent a biblical plague. You probably picture the Jordan River as deep and wide like the Mississippi or at least the Delaware. It once was mighty. Today, however, the Jordan is not much wider than the Neshaminy Creek.

Despite its narrow span, the Jordan River was and is a powerful symbol. It was the border between nations. It still is today. On the other bank is the country of Jordan. While I performed a renewal of baptism for many on our trip, there were warnings not to cross to the opposite side. To make sure you obey, armed soldiers patrolled both banks.

The bank of the Jordan River is a perfect place to begin this series we call “Follow.” Our desire is to have a fresh encounter with Jesus, to meet Jesus as if for the first time, to hear and discover what it means to follow Him. So let’s start where He started. All four Gospels say Jesus begins His ministry at the Jordan River. Why here?

It’s a famous starting line in the Bible. After four hundred years as slaves, after forty years wandering in the wilderness, the children of Israel reach the Jordan River.

So when the people broke camp to cross the Jordan, the priests carrying the ark of the covenant went ahead of them. Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water’s edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing...So the people crossed over opposite Jericho. The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord stopped in the middle of the Jordan and stood on dry ground, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground. Joshua 3:14-17

Just as Washington crossing the Delaware is a turning point in the birth of our nation, crossing the Jordan is the beginning of the conquest of Canaan and the start of the Israelite nation.

Centuries later, Elijah, the greatest of all Old Testament prophets, crosses the Jordan River in the opposite direction before he ascends to heaven in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:7-12). The very last verses of the Old Testament promise Elijah will come back.

See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction. Malachi 4:5-6

Where will Elijah return? Through the same door he left: the Jordan River. Eight hundred years after Elijah disappeared, a prophet appears in the desert of Judea, near the Jordan River, looking and acting a lot like Elijah.

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" (Isaiah 40:3) John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. Matthew 3:1-6

Now you know why John wanders in the wilderness, wearing a camel-skin suit and eating honey-dipped grasshoppers. This is exactly what Elijah did. John is a new Elijah, Elijah part two, Elijah the sequel. And in fulfillment of Isaiah's promise, he is preparing the way. The way for what? A new beginning. Just as the kingdom of Israel began by the crossing of the Jordan River, a new kingdom will come here at the Jordan River. This time, it will not be a kingdom of earth, but the Kingdom of Heaven. Just as the first Elijah crossed the Jordan and ascended into the kingdom of heaven, the second Elijah crosses back over the Jordan to declare the descent of the kingdom of heaven.

John is like Elijah in every way except one...he baptizes. That's why we call him John...the Baptist. What is baptism? The Greek word *baptizo* means to dip, submerge, immerse, wash, bathe, and overwhelm. Archaeologists have uncovered many indoor and outdoor pools called a mikveh from the first century BC and AD. These are baths – but not to wash off physical dirt. To obey God's law, a person immersed in the waters of a mikveh to wash away spiritual impurity. Not far from where John baptizes in the Jordan, is the desert compound where the Dead Sea Scroll community lives. The Jews who write the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Essenes, strictly obey the Law. To do so they build nine mikvaot. Each member of the community enters the pool several times a day – morning, afternoon and night – to wash away sin. They even maintained a wall on the staircase so impure people descending into the pool will not infect pure people rising from the pool.

Some scholars believe John the Baptist may have lived with the Essenes and learned about baptism from them. Yet John makes one crucial change. Yes, baptism is for washing away sin, but it needs to be done once. Baptism, for John, is not a revolving door of purity and impurity. Baptism is the doorway into the Kingdom of Heaven.

This is why it requires *repentance*. In Greek the word literally means “a change of mind” which includes a change of direction. Maybe you’ve heard the story about Harold who receives a call from his wife while driving. “Harold are you driving on 95?” “Yes,” Harold replies. “Well, watch out,” his wife warns. “I heard on the news there’s a car going the wrong way.” “One car?” Harold replies, “There are hundreds of them!” Repentance is discovering you’re going the wrong way, farther from God. Repentance is turning around, admitting your way is not working and turning to God.

So let’s put it all together. John the Baptist, the new Elijah, appears in the Jordan River, to announce a new Kingdom – the Kingdom of Heaven. He calls everyone to repent or turn toward God, confess their sins, and receive, not a revolving door of washing, but a one-time baptism which opens the door to God’s Kingdom. Multitudes leave the comfort of their homes and travel miles in the hot, desolate, wilderness. And when they arrive, John ups the ante.

I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. Matthew 3:11

That is power! When the King of heaven arrives He will cleanse you with the purifying fire of the Holy Spirit. I imagine multitudes lining both banks of the Jordan, descending into the river for round the clock baptisms, getting ready for the arrival of God’s King. Waiting and watching for royalty to descend in a chariot of fire. And while every head is lifted high, while every eye fixed on the sky, while all scan the clouds for a sign, a man steps out of the crowd and walks up to John. His accent betrays his northern origin. His rough hands give away his profession: a craftsman or construction worker. Nobody thinks much of him or recognizes him. Except John.

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented. Matthew 3:13-15

The King of heaven comes not with chariots of fire or armies of angels. He appears in the crowd like one of us. To follow Jesus often means to try to be like Him. Yet first, God came to be like us in Jesus. The Son of God didn’t need to be born as a baby, but He was to be like us. He didn’t need to grow up in a family, but He did to be like us. He didn’t need to hold down a job, pay taxes, eat meals and sleep like us, but He did. Why? To understand us? No. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He did it, first, to take away our sin. And second to model for us what it means to have a right relationship with God, a life of love, joy, peace, grace and freedom, a life as God always intended it to be. Jesus doesn’t need to be baptized and He doesn’t need the Holy Spirit. He does this to show you what God will give you if you follow Him.

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and

alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” Matthew 3:16-17

The first thing John says Jesus will do is **Baptize You with the Holy Spirit**. God puts His power in you. You have a heavenly power more intense and eternal than any energy found here on earth. When you say ‘Yes’ to Jesus and follow Him as your Savior and Lord He pours the Holy Spirit into you. Every Christian has the power of the Holy Spirit within. But not all Christians are **filled** with the Holy Spirit. Why are so many believers exhausted? We are doing it our way, running on our power. We keep tight control instead of letting the Holy Spirit lead. If Jesus the Almighty Son of God “was led by the Spirit” (Luke 4:1) so should we. How? Let go of control. Start the day this way: when you get out of bed, get down on your knees and say, “Holy Spirit, my life belongs to you. Tell me what you want me to do. Your will not mine be done.” When you come to a difficult decision, a stressful situation, an exhausting task, pause and say, “Holy Spirit, my life belongs to you. Tell me what you want me to do. Your will not mine be done.” Before you go to sleep, pray, “Holy Spirit, my life belongs to you. Forgive me for taking control. Thank you for leading me. Your will not mine be done.”

How do you know the Holy Spirit’s will? The Spirit will speak to you in prayer. The Spirit will speak to you through God’s Word. Read the passages of the Follow series every day. Use these different methods to get the most out of them. Prayer and Scripture are the way to turn on the power of the Holy Spirit. If you are doing this and you still don’t feel the power of the Spirit there is another reason.

Jesus needs to **Burn Off Your Impurities**. John spoke this about Jesus:

His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire. Matthew 3: 12

A kernel of wheat has an outer husk called the “chaff.” Using a winnowing fork, a farmer throws the kernel of wheat into the air to let the wind separate the lighter chaff from the heavier wheat. Once the wheat and chaff are separated, the valuable wheat is stored in the barn while the useless chaff is burned up. When John the Baptist says Jesus has a winnowing fork in His hand, it means He wants to remove the useless chaff from our lives: the impurities and sins, the weakness and shortcomings, the fears and scars. The longer we follow the Lord, the closer we get to Him, the more He burns away all the chaff that covers the priceless kernel of your life.

So many people I meet, have a hard-shell over their heart. It’s there for protection, because you’ve been hurt, wounded, abused and you’re not going to let that happen again. A tough image impresses others, maybe strikes fear in them so they don’t see the fear in you. A shell of sarcasm or humor hides the pain. You might even cover yourself with a religious shell like the Pharisees and Sadducees. Yet John the Baptist said, God can do more with hard rocks than hard-hearted religious people. A hard-shell keeps people from knowing you, helping you, loving you. It even keeps God out. Let Jesus peel off the chaff and expose your heart. The main way God peels off the chaff is through other people who love us, challenge us, speak the truth to us and hold us accountable.

That's one of the great blessings of Growth Groups – they show you how to break through the hard shell and finally be yourself. Let Jesus burn off each impurity.

Because when you, do the Father will **Bless You with His Love**. When Jesus rose out of the Jordan River, He heard His Father's voice say, "This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). What the Father says to His Son, He says to you. You are His beloved child. Let yourself be loved. Why do we hold that husk over our hearts? We believe we are unloveable. This starts when we are young.

A new study published in the UK reveals children are struggling with low self-esteem, loneliness, or deep levels of unhappiness. A free, private counseling hotline for children and teens up to the age of 19, said it was contacted 35,244 times in the last year by children struggling with how to be happy. Previously, self-harm and eating disorders were among the most common causes for children to contact the helpline. But today, unhappiness is strongly connected with the drive to keep up one's image on social media. One expert noted, "It is clear that the pressure to keep up with friends and have the perfect life online is adding to the sadness that many young people feel on a daily basis."¹

What's the way to find happiness? You are the Father's beloved. Let God love you. Let yourself be loved. Don't miss this: the Father tells the Son, "You are my beloved, I'm pleased with you," before the Son does a single thing. That Almighty love will carry Jesus through three years of ministry in Galilee, the agony of Gethsemane and the darkness of Golgotha.

You are God's beloved and you don't have to do a thing except let Him love you. Stop listening to the voices of condemnation and criticism. You are God's Beloved.

Stop hiding behind the hard husk of a tough exterior. You don't need to prove anything. You are God's Beloved.

Stop comparing yourself to others. You are God's Beloved.

Stop the revolving door of trying to please everyone and God. You are God's Beloved.

Come out of the pain, the anxiety, the fear, the shame, abuse, addiction, trauma.

You are God's Beloved. Let God love you.

Today I invite you to come forward and let God love you. In a moment we will offer a renewal of baptism. This is a time to commit or recommit yourself to Follow Jesus. When you come forward you'll be asked, "Who is your Lord and Savior?" you reply, "Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior." Then the person will touch your forehead with water and say, "Remember your baptism. You are a Beloved Child of God."

¹ Matthew Hussey Tweet, "The Web is quietly creating a generation of miserable kids," The Next Web

A woman working in the rough and tumble world of Manhattan came to the end of an extremely stressful day. She received a poor review from her supervisor. Work piled up around her. Emails, texts, meetings, demands, deadlines. Her stress and tension began to show. She snapped at a few coworkers. Then one of them called her the B-word. It was just a word. But it triggered all the condemning voices buried in her heart. That night she left work to attend a worship service at her church. It was Good Friday and they offered a renewal of baptism. Still feeling shaken and ripped apart inside, still tormented by the condemning voices of yesterday, she came forward, almost mechanically, and confessed her faith in Jesus to receive baptism. Then she heard a word that liberated her. In that moment a voice called to her. It used a different B word – Beloved. You are my Beloved.