

THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY - THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

Secret Weapon of Baptism

Isaiah 49:1-6 (NIV)

¹ Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the LORD called me; from my mother's womb he has spoken my name. ² He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver. ³ He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor." ⁴ But I said, "I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing at all. Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand, and my reward is with my God." ⁵ And now the LORD says— he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength— ⁶ he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

Okay. I'm over 40 now, which apparently means that in some workplaces I am a protected class against agism. So, hopefully my 25-year-old movie reference will still connect with some of you. In *Men in Black*, when Will Smith's Agent J character gets his first secret agent weapon, he gets a tiny pocket-sized gun called a "noisy cricket," to which he responds in disgust, "I feel like I'm going to break this thing." A little later in the movie, you find out that this deceptively small gun packs a huge punch. That kind of makes it a secret weapon of sorts, one where its appearance is deceiving, subverting our expectations.

God is unveiling a weapon here through the prophet Isaiah and wants the world to take note of it. "Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the LORD called me; from my mother's womb he has spoken my name. He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver. He said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor.'" (verses 1-3) A sharpened sword. A polished arrow hid in a quiver. Seems like an obviously powerful weapon that can cut down and pierce enemies before they know what hit them. This is what the people of Israel were looking forward to.

But what did they get? A helpless baby who needed a mom and dad to take care of him, feed him, change his diapers. A baby born to a newly married, low-income family who used an animal's feeding trough for his first bed, not someone wrapped in Egyptian cotton blankets, a crib with gold inlays, and a silver spoon in his mouth. As he grew up, sure, he seemed gifted, asked good questions, gave good answers, but he didn't stand out from the crowd. This Jesus goes to the Jordan River where John is preaching repentance and baptizing people to wash away their sins and to give them a new life in God.

So, why is Jesus going? Isn't he supposed to be sinless, perfect? Sinners need to repent, to turn away from all the things that they do wrong and all the good things that they fail to do. They need to be baptized. What does Jesus need to turn away from? Why on earth would he come to be baptized? He should be above this. This doesn't look right.

Instead, it looks powerless, pointless, wasted time, effort, and energy. John the Baptist reveals the same thought when he tries to deter Jesus saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Matthew 3:14) You have no sin, Jesus. You don't need to turn from anything. You don't need to be washed clean. It seems like this weapon isn't as powerful as prophesied. Seems like, "I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing at all." (verse 4)

Why is Jesus getting baptized? Is it just to show us what must be done, what we must do, if we are to get right with God and belong with him? Is this Jesus just being an example for us to follow, to make the same plans and commitments and covenants and promises that he did?

There are many who look at the act of baptism and say that this is an ordinance, something that is on me to do to get myself right with God, to make a commitment or a covenant with him, a promise that I will follow him and obey him all my life, that I won't ever sin again, that this is me following God's command to start getting right with God, to earn my place with him. This mindset, though, makes baptism what you do for God. With that focus brings the uncertainty of what happens when I don't make good on all my promises. Will I be forgiven? Will I get the best Heavenly Father has to give? Am I saved or was my baptism wasted effort?

If all Jesus is doing here by getting baptized is to give us an instruction manual, a to do list, of how to get right with him, earn a place with him, then Jesus is nothing more than a life coach, a mentor. He's not a Savior. This is too little of a thing for Jesus. No, God is doing something much bigger with Jesus' baptism. He's revealing his small secret weapon that packs a big punch.

John the Baptist talked about the one who is coming that he is more powerful than him, that this is someone who does more than give us an example to follow. Even though John tried to deter Jesus from getting baptized because Jesus seemingly didn't need it, that it would be wasted effort, Jesus told John to proceed. "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." (Matthew 3:15) Then John consented. After he baptized Jesus, "he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'" (Mark 1:10-11) All of the sudden the secret weapon of God prophesied by Isaiah is revealed but striking differently. This small package of an ordinary looking man is the one and only, completely unique, Son of God, approved by God the Holy Spirit and God the Father. This is one who came to strike down not physical enemies, but spiritual ones. He has come to keep God's command for all people for all time, that he would fulfill all righteousness, for you and me, for all of Israel, and for all the world, done looking as an ordinary, humble man.

Jesus's baptism shows him stepping in as our proxy. If you are unfamiliar with the term, a proxy is someone who acts as a substitute, one who has authority or power to act for another person. Jesus does this as he fulfilled all righteousness for us with his baptism, not because he needed it, but because we needed it. Because Jesus did this, we stand with the same approval from God the Father. Jesus fulfills his role as the prophesied secret weapon of God, that he's not a small Savior, but a big Savior. "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." (verse 6) Jesus' baptism was a big act of him fulfilling righteousness for us, for all people!

This is what makes baptism such a secret weapon for us today. While many think that baptism is something that we do for God, that this is us keeping a command, it's actually the reverse. Baptism is done to us. It's a passive experience. You get baptized. You are not washing yourself clean or making yourself new with promises or covenants. God washes you clean of all your sins. God covers you with Jesus' fulfilled righteousness. God adopts you into his family. God makes you an heir to receive the best that Heavenly Father has to offer. All of this God does for us with baptism, this seemingly useless and plain dumping of water on people with some words about God.

With this secret weapon of baptism, God subverts our expectations again. By baptism, God gives us a new identity. We are perfect before him right now, not because we fulfilled an ordinance or made a covenant, but because God labored and completed the perfection for us. This changes us, who we are, what we do. As Paul described in our second Bible reading today: "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." (Romans 6:4) God stabs, pierces, kills, and buries our sins and our sinful nature; we don't kill them or bury them or force ourselves to turn away from them. God raises us up with a new life; we can't resurrect ourselves from the dead. He makes us alive, completely new, slashing the chains of sin, piercing the heart of the devil's accusations against us.

Baptism is God's secret weapon because it looks like nothing special. It looks like us doing something. Instead, it is God showering us with his good and perfect gifts. Jesus' baptism is him serving as our proxy of perfection, using his strength and effort to keep God's commands perfectly for us, fulfilling all righteousness for us. By baptism, God cuts down our sins and pierces Satan's accusations so that they die. By baptism, God saves us to live a new life, not by what we do or promises or covenants we make, but entirely by what he does through simple, plain water and his powerful Word. Amen.