

God bless Sunday School teachers. When it comes to the tough questions, the big questions, the existential questions of life and faith and the very nature of God, do you know who usually has to field those questions? It's not the scholars. It's not the pastors. No... it's the Sunday School teachers.

Sunday School teachers get confronted with some next-level theological queries posed by some pint-sized theologians. It starts from the beginning, *in* the beginning, when the Sunday School lessons focus on creation. Should be simple enough, right? God created everything. Simple and straightforward. Yeah, kids don't make anything simple and straightforward... so Sunday School teachers have to field everything from the logistical questions (*How did God make the whole world in just six days?*) to the philosophical questions (*If God created everything, who created God?*).

And the questions keep on coming. They continue in December, when the Sunday School curriculum begins to make its way toward Bethlehem and the story of Christmas. Christmas is a busy time for Sunday School teachers to begin with -- they're kind of the holiday cruise directors of the church. In the midst of planning holiday parties and rehearsing Christmas pageants and crafting nativity scenes out of glitter and cotton balls and God knows what else, Sunday School teachers also have to field the questions. In December, they're asked everything from the awkward questions (*The Virgin Mary? What's a virgin?*) to the theological ones (*Is Jesus God? Or is Jesus God's Son? Or is he both? How can he be both?*)

I'd like to say it all settles down by Easter, but... let's be serious. Did you really think these budding booster-seat theologians would let the resurrection go unquestioned? Oh, no. They raise procedural questions: *Okay, so how does Jesus rising*

from the dead save us from our sins? Especially since he did it before I even did any of those sins? How does that work? They raise somewhat disturbing questions: *If Jesus was dead for three days... then on Easter did he smell like he was dead for three days?* They raise head-scratching, eyebrow-raising questions: *Jesus rose from the dead? So... he's like a zombie?* (Think I'm exaggerating with that one? I once had a 30-minute conversation on the Jesus-zombie issue during a confirmation class session.)

Sunday School teachers are confronted with some next-level theological questions. And don't get me wrong: as roles in the church go, being a Sunday School teacher can be one of the most rewarding, most downright fun... but on some days... well, God bless Sunday School teachers. (Shout out to the Sunday School teachers! To those worshipping online, thank them in the comments.)

Today, as we continue this sermon series on the "Greatest Story There Ever Was," this story of Jesus' life as captured in the Gospel of Luke, we encounter a scripture rife with Sunday-School-teacher level questions. Today is something of a special day in the church, a holiday. It's admittedly a minor holiday, compared to the ones we've just celebrated, ones like Christmas and Epiphany... yet it's a holiday all the same. Today is a minor holiday in the church known as "Baptism of the Lord" Sunday. It's a holiday about (spoiler alert!) the baptism of our Lord. (At some point, we just stopped getting creative with the names.) And so, in our scripture reading for today, we read about... the baptism of our Lord. You heard it earlier in worship, but hear part of it again:

[Luke 3:21-22, NRSV]

²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in

bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

There it is: the baptism of our Lord. On Baptism of the Lord Sunday, a preacher has quite a lot to work with. The story of the baptism of Jesus is one that appears in all four gospels, with all kinds of nuances into which a preacher can really sink her teeth. Yet for the most part, these various tellings of the baptism of Jesus share the same basic features: there’s John the Baptist, preaching a baptism of repentance; there’s Jesus, coming to be baptized; there’s the appearance of a dove or the sound of a heavenly voice. And voila! Just like that, the Lord is baptized. Happy Baptism of the Lord Sunday!

But there’s a line of questioning that arises from those shared story details... a line of Sunday-School-teacher level questioning... a line of questioning that a precocious Sunday School kid might raise with his or her Sunday School teacher. I imagine it would go something like this:

Sunday School Kid: Baptism of repentance? What’s repentance?

Sunday School Teacher: Well, it’s turning away from our sins.

Sunday School Kid: And Jesus was baptized?

Sunday School Teacher: Yeah. It’s in the Bible.

Sunday School Kid: And Jesus never sinned?

Sunday School Teacher: Yeah. It’s in the Bible.

Sunday School Kid: Then... why did Jesus need to be baptized?

Sunday School Teacher: (long pause) Go ask the pastor.

Well played, Sunday School Teacher. Well played.

That question is at the heart of this scripture, this day, this Baptism of the Lord Sunday. Jesus was baptized. But why? Why was Jesus baptized? How do we grapple

with that? I read one commentator who describes it as the “unexplainable” baptism of Jesus... and that commentator has clearly never taught Sunday School, because that kind of response (*it's a mystery, it's unexplainable*) does not cut it with theologically savvy ten-year-olds. “It is unexplainable,” he writes, “because One who has never and would never sin submits to a baptism that is a sign of repentance.”¹ Yeah, thanks for clearing that up.

So what gives? If this is a baptism of repentance, why is Jesus being baptized? What does Jesus have to repent from? It's hard to say what's going on here. The story as it appears here in the Gospel of Luke gives us precious few details about the actual event of Jesus' baptism. Luke tells us that Jesus prays, but he doesn't tell us that Jesus repents. Luke doesn't even explicitly say it was John -- with his “baptism of repentance” -- who baptized Jesus. So... back to the Sunday School Kid's question: Why did Jesus need to be baptized?

Good question, Sunday School Kid. Even the pastor doesn't have a quick, ready answer.

So maybe we have to back up in our line of questioning, all the way back to the Sunday School Kid's opening query: *Baptism of repentance? What's repentance? What's repentance?* It's turning from our sins... right? That's the Sunday School Teacher answer, and it's a good one. Solid. Theologically sound. But maybe there's more to it than that.

In fact, I read the work of another commentator who said this:

John called people to repent and to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins in order to be part of the coming new world. Repent is to turn away from

¹ Michael Card, *Luke: The Gospel of Amazement* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 60.

complicity with the old age and its values and behaviors and to turn towards the coming realm.²

Hmmm. That's an interesting take. To "repent is to turn away from complicity with the old age and its values and behaviors and to turn towards the coming realm." In that line of thinking, sure, repentance is about turning away from our individual sins, our 'personal moral transgressions'... but it's bigger than that, too. It's about turning away from one realm and its values, and toward another realm and its values. It's about turning away brokenness of the world and turning towards the wholeness of the kingdom. It's about eschewing one and choosing the other. And if that's the case... then it all kind of makes sense. If that's the case, why *wouldn't* Jesus be baptized?!?

When I baptize someone in the church -- whether a squirming infant or a grown adult -- I talk about what baptism does, what it signifies, what it means. And I have no shortage of things to talk about. Our baptisms are beautifully laden with an abundance of meaning: the forgiveness of sins, the participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the gift of new birth, the gift of grace, the claim of God upon our lives, the adoption into the covenant community. All of that is wrapped up in this thing called baptism. There's a lot there. I could talk. For a while. For longer than you probably want me to.

On a holiday like today, this "Baptism of the Lord" Sunday, we often talk about remembering our baptisms (even if we can't "remember" the event itself) by calling all of that meaning to mind, by remembering what our baptisms mean. But this time around, as we remember our baptisms, and Jesus' baptism, on *this* Baptism of the Lord

² Ronald J. Allen, "Baptism of Our Lord: Commentary on Luke 3:15-17, 21-22," in *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/baptism-of-our-lord-3/commentary-on-luke-315-17-21-22-3>.

Sunday, I want to focus all the more on this new or nuanced idea of what repentance -- in baptism, and in our own lives -- means.

Remember your baptism, church, and “repent.” Remember your baptism and turn. Turn away from the specific sinful brokenness in you, and turn toward a redeemed and forgiven version of you. Remember your baptism and turn. Turn away from the brokenness of the world as it is, and turn toward the reality of the kingdom, of the world as God intends it to be. This week of all weeks, when we have witnessed the brokenness of the world in stark and horrifying detail, should make us want all the more to embrace the values of the kingdom, its values of justice and peace.

So this week of all weeks, remember your baptism. Remember your baptism and turn, choosing to make the values of God’s kingdom the guiding values of your life. Remember your baptism and be thankful... thankful to the God who calls us and empowers us to turn.

Turn, church! Turn! See, if I go around randomly shouting “repent!” rather than “turn!”... well, it makes social distancing happen pretty naturally on its own, if you know what I’m saying. But “turn!”? That gets closer to what I really mean, and to what God truly seeks.

Get turning, church. Turn towards justice. Turn towards peace. Let it begin with you.