

When we read our Bibles, we come across plenty of places where the words and actions of God don't seem to make sense to us, at least at first glance. There are many, many occasions where God chooses what would seem to us as foolish or weak, and then through His infinite wisdom and strength uses such things to show that His ways truly are the best.

One of the places we see this is in the Baptism of our Lord. At first, it seems all backward and wrong, but then Jesus reveals how through this act, righteousness – all righteousness – is brought about.

The confusion about God's decisions and actions are heard in the objection that John the Baptist raises when Jesus comes from Galilee to be baptized by him in the Jordan. "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

John is flabbergasted by Jesus' request, and with good reason. Jesus is the greater one, the one whose sandals John was unworthy to unite, the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Jesus was the one whose way John and his baptism had been preparing.

And perhaps most confusing of all, Jesus is sinless. John himself declared Jesus to be the spotless Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. John's baptism is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. A sinless man doesn't need forgiveness; there's nothing in Jesus of which He needs to repent. John knows that he is the one who needs the forgiveness. Why on earth should a sinful man baptize the sinless Son of God? What good could it possibly bring about?

John's objections make perfect sense to human reason. And note that Jesus doesn't say that any of them are wrong in and of themselves. Jesus is the greater one, the sinless one. So Jesus begins His response to John by saying, "Let it be so now." "Permit it, allow it to happen." Jesus is in effect saying, "You're not completely wrong in your thinking, John, but there's more going on here than you realize, so trust in me."

There in the Jordan, Jesus is doing what Paul describes in our Epistle, choosing the things that appear foolish in man's eyes in order to show forth true wisdom. Jesus declares that having John baptize Him is "fitting." It perfectly fits into God's design for all things, the plan that the Lord has established from the foundation of the world. It's as if Jesus said, "You might not understand it, John, but this is exactly how it's supposed to be."

No doubt adding to John's confusion is a little word that follows: "thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." "For us." Jesus doesn't say that it is fitting for Him alone to fulfill all righteousness.

Now of course, Jesus will be the one who brings about that righteousness. He will be the one, the only one, who pays for the sins of the world. He will go to the cross and give His life purely out of His own love, grace, and mercy, with no man, woman, or child ever earning even the least bit of it. The Scriptures declare several times that salvation belongs to God.

And yet God chooses to work through men – sinful men – to bring about His righteousness. Yes, John the Baptist is a sinner, yet God has given John faith, and God works through that faith to cause John to do His will. In this, John follows all the prophets, who, though each and every one of them were sinners, were given faith and spoke the holy word of God. And John will be followed by the apostles, who were all sinners, and yet were used by God in faith to go into all the world, making disciples by baptizing and teaching, which are ultimately the work of God the Holy Spirit.

This working of God, using even sinners like John, will bring about all righteousness. Not just some righteousness, or the beginning of righteousness, or enough righteousness. Jesus' baptism in the Jordan is a necessary part of God's plan for salvation – without it, the whole thing falls apart. The Lord has set exactly how He will bring about righteousness for man, and Jesus being baptized by a man, just like Jesus being crucified by men, is absolutely necessary.

Hearing these words of Jesus, John responds in faith. Even though he doesn't fully understand what is going on, or how exactly this will fulfill all righteousness, John humbly trusts that God knows what He's doing, and so he baptizes Jesus there in the Jordan.

There, Jesus, who has no sins of His own to confess, confesses upon Himself the sins of the whole world. In those waters, Jesus submits to His Father's will, that He become the New Adam and keep the Law perfectly where the first Adam – and all his descendants – had failed. The Father then proclaims His divine approval from heaven: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," while the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove for all to see.

Jesus enters the Jordan, where the Israelites of old had first crossed into the Promised Land, so that He might lead His people, the Israel of faith, to the eternal Promised Land in heaven. On His journey, He will do many things that defy human reason or understanding – His baptism isn't the only one – but each and every one of them will be fitting in bringing about all righteousness. Christ will work through that which appears to be foolish and weak to bring about the greatest blessings ever known.

This is still how our Lord works to bring blessing to His people. Just consider Baptism. If we were to come up with how it might appear to be brought into the Kingdom of God, given a new and eternal life, joined to the very Trinity, we would probably think that it should look spectacular. If such great things are done by God, wouldn't it make sense for God to make it look great, so there could be no doubt as to what happens? If we got to witness the heavens torn apart, or see the Heavenly Dove come down, or hear the voice of the Father – even an angel would suffice – surely we wouldn't doubt or treat Holy Baptism lightly or take it for granted.

Yet the Bible has example after example for us of heavenly signs being quickly forgotten or declared insufficient. In our Old Testament lesson, we hear of Joshua leading the people across the Jordan. You'll probably remember that this was the second visit to the land. The people could have entered forty years before, but despite the fact that they had watched God part the Red Sea, and trembled as His holy presence descended onto Mount Sinai, and been fed with miraculous bread from heaven without fail, they figured that God would allow them to be slaughtered by the peoples of Canaan, because they were really big.

Or, if you've been following along with our daily reading plan in Mark, we hear in chapter 8 how the disciples think Jesus is warning them about always being sure to have enough bread on hand, despite the fact that they watched Him feed thousands and thousands with only a few loaves and fishes – and had baskets of leftovers to boot!

Human reason would lead us to think that signs would give certainty – that seeing is believing – but as the Bible and history show over and over again, the reason of man often falls short. It is the word of the Lord that endures forever. It is the word of God that contains the power of God unto salvation, as St. Paul writes in Romans.

Thus God works through Holy Baptism, not in great displays of wonder and might, but in simple water joined to the hidden strength of His word, the word that contains His almighty power.

That word, and the power unto salvation it contains, are brought by the Lord in other ways that appear as foolishness to man's reason as well. One that connects well to our Gospel is God's use of sinners to bring about His righteousness. John the Baptist was utterly shocked that God would have him, a sinner, baptize the sinless Lamb of God. In the Church today, God still uses sinners to bring about His righteousness.

For example, God has called me here to be your pastor. And I am a sinner. God requires His pastors – stewards of the mysteries, as Scripture says – to be faithful. And I haven't always been so. For this, I ask for your forgiveness. I will strive to do better, to be more faithful in my calling as your pastor. And I would ask for your prayers, that the Holy Spirit would strengthen me to do so.

Yet still God gives us great comfort in the fact that He does work through sinners to bring about His righteousness. When I, or any other pastor, preaches and teaches in accord with God's word, then you can have absolute confidence that God is at work there, because it's God's word, not man's. The Bible comes from the Spirit, the breath, of God, regardless of whose physical mouth is speaking the words. As Jesus said, speaking to His apostles, "He who hears you hears me."

Or when it comes to the absolution, it's God at work, not man. Again, as Jesus said, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." That's why we confess in our Small Catechism, "I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of the sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself."

God's working through sinners doesn't only take place through pastors, either. When you as Christian parents, or grandparents, or friends, or neighbors, speak God's word, you too can know that God is at work.

Satan will try his best to attack you with guilt, to say that because you're also a sinner, you've got no room to talk. But again, it is God's word, and where it is spoken faithfully, it carries God's authority and power. Our Lord works through sinners. And while that doesn't excuse sin – nothing does – it reassures us that God works even in spite of sin.

Our confidence, our hope, our strength, our security, these are always to be found in Christ and His word. Like John, we might wonder how God can work through sinners to bring about righteousness, or how it can be fitting for us, God working through us as He worked through John, to accomplish His good and gracious will.

Yet John here gives us the perfect example to follow. Though we may not understand, we trust in our Lord and submit to His word, for that word will never fail.

In the name of Jesus, amen.