

We are in week six of a 44-week series called *I Am*, which will ultimately march through the entire Gospel of John from beginning to end. Last week, Kevin took us through what is quite possibly the most famous passage in the entire Bible, in all of Scripture, which is the story of Jesus speaking with Nicodemus, who came to see him in the dark of night. It ended with the gospel writer reminding us that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life. This morning, we were going to follow that story through the rest of John 3. This passage has particular beauty and significance in its own right.

It is hard to believe that it has now been almost 20 years since Steve Jobs walked to the stage of the Moscone Center in San Francisco in January of 2007 and unveiled, for the very first time, the iPhone. I remember that iconic moment just like it was yesterday. Mostly because I was convinced, at that time I was a PC guy, that it was all bluster, that it was going to be a subpar phone from a company that had zero experience making phones. It hit the market, and it took me all of a year and a half until the next iPhone, the 3G, came out before I jumped on the bandwagon and drank the Kool-Aid.

I bring all of this up because what I remember about that first introduction is that as Apple prepared to sell that first iPhone later that year, on every store window, in every billboard, in every commercial, there was this famous tagline: "This changes everything." That's a lofty thing to say. If you're going to say it, you had better back it up. And suffice to say, nearly 20 years later, I don't think they were wrong. Because in the years that followed, whether you joined team iPhone or team Android, everyone or everything has changed.

If you lived around here in 2010 through 2015, all of the cities up and down the Peninsula from San Francisco to San Jose were full of these new startups and app makers who were unveiling all these new ways to make your phone be and do everything for you. Of course, we're now a few years downstream of that, and we've learned somewhere along the way that just because you can, doesn't necessarily mean that you should, as we now have a world full of phone addicts. But I digress.

Sometimes everything changes. We have lived through several of these moments. The most recent, of course, is the generative and agentic AI. If you've been paying attention to any of the graduation commencement speeches around the country these last few

weeks, then you know that they are not necessarily popular. But love it or hate it, everything changed.

This morning's passage picks up in the wake of Jesus' exchange with Nicodemus, in the wake of the gospel writer's commentary on Jesus in verses 16-21 and begins with two inconspicuous words: "After this." By themselves, those words don't mean much at all, but in context, they reveal that what is about to follow in John 3 is very much a continuation of the thought from what precedes it, which is the conversation that Jesus had with Nicodemus.

Jesus had some befuddling or confounding things to say to this very Jewish religious man, this Pharisee. He said things like, "No one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again." He said, "No one can enter the Kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit, that flesh gives birth to flesh, and the Spirit gives birth to spirit." And of course, Nicodemus struggled like any of us would to understand what Jesus was saying.

And so he said, "How can this be? How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born." I want you to keep that conversation very much in your mind as we jump to the next portion of the text in John 3:22.

After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized. Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were coming and being baptized. (This was before John was put in prison.) An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing. They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him." John 3:22-26

And so here you have two men, Jesus and John. You have two groups of disciples. John's disciples are confused, perhaps a little perplexed, and frustrated that this new guy, Jesus, has shown up on the scene and is stealing some of John's thunder. By doing so, he is stealing some of their thunder. In business terms, it feels like Jesus is stealing market share, perhaps.

Now, there are times when studying the Bible, it is good to be in the weeds, to live in the weeds, to fixate on and pay attention to every single word and every single tense of a word to more fully understand a text. And there are times to stop and zoom out and

make sure that you are not missing the forest for the trees, to see what is happening more broadly in its context.

I believe this is one of those times, because what is happening as both Jesus and John baptize is not just two Jewish rabbis doing the same thing. It may be the same word, it may even look the same from the outside, but it is not the same thing. So I want to pause here for just a moment and take you on a side quest.

You may remember that John is more commonly known as John the Baptist, or, as some commentators call him, John the Baptizer. This is so much what he does and what he is about that it has become part of his identity. He is not just John. He is John the Baptist. He is John the Baptizer. We are introduced to him in Matthew 3, Mark 1, Luke 1, and John 1.

In other words, John is almost the first thing that all four gospels talk about. He's the cousin of Jesus, and he's a big deal. So much so that, like Jesus, John's birth was foretold and prophesied about. Like Jesus, John was named John because God said so. From the moment that John came onto the scene, his message was simple and singular. It was repent. In other words, turn away from your sin, stop doing what you're doing, and be baptized. Be washed, be cleansed, be purified of your sin.

Now, it's probably not going to surprise you that, regardless of religious convictions, in ancient days, water was commonly used as a way to be cleansed. We take this for granted now because how many times a day do you go and wash your hands or take a shower, and wash your body? We use soap and water all the time to cleanse ourselves. It's second nature, but that wasn't always the case outside of religious purification back in those days. Whether you were a Jew or a pagan or an Egyptian or something else, water was commonly used as a way for a person to cleanse and purify themselves for religious reasons, and it was that way for thousands of years.

But that does not mean baptism was common. In fact, the Old Testament does not explicitly allude to baptism as we know it today at all. The closest example that we have is a story in 2 Kings 5, when a man with leprosy named Naaman is sent from one king to another king, from the king of Aram to the king of Israel, with a letter. That letter said, "With this letter, I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy." To which the king of Israel responded, "Am I, God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? Is he trying to pick a fight with me? Is that why he's doing this?" He was completely confounded.

When the prophet Elisha heard this, he told the king to have Naaman brought to him, and he told Naaman in that moment, "I want you to go wash yourselves seven times in the Jordan River, and your flesh will be restored, and you will be cleansed." That's basically it. That is the entire Old Testament account of cleansing and something that looks or sounds like baptism, which invites

a question. What happened between then and the days of John the Baptist that John would be a baptizer? Where did baptism come from?

There were four sects of Jewish believers when the New Testament began. There are the Sadducees, Pharisees, Zealots, and the Essenes. The Sadducees were more politically aligned. They're politically powerful. They were less devout in their faith. Some would say they deny the resurrection. The Pharisees come along, and they were much more devout in their faith, but they're often rather fundamentalist about it. They would follow the law to a "T" because that's what it's all about. The Zealots, on the other hand, are political antagonistic. They were called Zealots because they are zealously opposed to the Roman Empire, zealously opposed to any empire.

Then there are the Essenes, who are devout in their faith, and they just wanted to be left alone. They wanted to live in the desert. They were like monks or monastics. There are probably a few of you in this room who are like, "That sounds nice. I want to go live in the desert and just read the Bible."

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. He was deeply knowledgeable and deeply religious, but he was going to follow the law of the Hebrew Bible to the nth degree because, in his eyes, righteousness and salvation come through obedience. I'm going to do everything perfectly, as perfectly as I can.

Now, we don't know this explicitly, but there is a strong reason to believe John the Baptist would've been, or was, heavily influenced by the Essenes. From 1947 to 1956, a major archaeological discovery was made in caves near the Dead Sea site of Qumran. Today, we refer to what is found there as the Dead Sea Scrolls, a collection of about 1,000 manuscripts. Let that sink in. There are 1,000 different manuscripts of the Bible dating back to the first century, around the time of Jesus, and we didn't discover these until about 75 to 80 years ago. The Qumran people who lived in those caves would have been Essenes.

I share that so that you can track with me on this quote that I want to share from Everett Ferguson, who wrote, "The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls brought considerable speculation of a link between John the Baptist and the people of the scrolls, the Essenes." The case for a connection is circumstantial but plausible. John came from a priestly family, and the Qumran community was led by priests. His parents were elderly at the time of his birth, and the Essenes were known for rearing orphan children.

His activity was in the wilderness near Qumran. His ministry was based on Isaiah 40:3, "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord.'" An important verse for the Qumran community. And he practiced baptism, a rite important to the Essenes.

Josephus' account indicated that both the Essenes and John required a life change before baptism. Josephus was not a follower of Jesus. He was an ancient Jewish historian who wrote extensively about events in the days of Jesus. He had first-hand knowledge of what was happening, and so he wrote about John's ministry. He wrote about the Essenes. He wrote about what Jesus said and did, and about what his disciples were doing. It's all extra-biblical, which really paints a fuller picture for us as we try to understand the days of Christ.

I share all of that to draw attention to the fact that baptism seemed to emerge largely from the faith and the practices of the Essenes, according to Josephus. The Essenes lived by what he called a community rule, which governed who could and could not join them out there in the desert. It governed how they were to live. So a wicked person was not to be welcomed among them. One of the scrolls found had this written on it:

He shall not be reckoned among the perfect. He shall neither be purified by atonement, nor cleansed by purifying waters, nor sanctified by seas and rivers, nor washed clean with any ablution. Unclean, unclean shall he be. But when his flesh is sprinkled with purifying water and sanctified by cleansing water, it shall be made clean by the humble submission of his soul to all the precepts of God. To the one who does wish to enter the Essene community, God will cleanse him of all his wicked deeds with the spirit of holiness, like purifying water. He will shed upon him the Spirit of Truth to cleanse him of all abomination and injustice, and he shall be plunged into a spirit of purification. They shall not enter the water to partake of that pure meal of the men of holiness, for they shall not be cleansed unless they turn from their wickedness, for all who transgress his words are unclean. Scroll Found At Qumran

Now, I just gave you a word salad of ancient history, and I realize that. But all of this is the long way of explaining where John the Baptist was coming from, both in a physical sense from the wilderness, from the desert, and in a religious sense that righteousness for him comes through repentance, and it comes through a washing, a purification. So it comes as no surprise that when we are introduced to John in each of the gospel accounts, his ministry starts in exactly that way.

He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God's salvation.'" John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Luke 3:3-7

So they're very tribal. This is what John was about. He came to prepare the way for Jesus and to call people to repent and be baptized. One day, an interesting thing happened. John alludes to it, but he doesn't tell the story in full; Matthew does. Matthew 3:13-14 says, *"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?'"* John's confused because for him, baptism is about turning away from sin. It's about being cleansed from sin. But here's Jesus, this sinless, spotless Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and he's coming to John to be baptized. It's a curious twist, both for John and for us as the reader.

Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. 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." vv. 15-17

Now this is a cool moment. If you've read any of the Gospels before, it may be a moment that you know and remember well. But up until this week, I never attributed much more to this moment than it was the inauguration of Jesus' ministry, and a beautiful moment between the Father and the Son.

This week, I found myself reading the words of some early church thinkers. I wanted to understand this moment between John's disciples and Jesus' disciples a little bit better. I wanted to understand how ancient thinkers practiced and understood baptism a little bit better, not resorting to sort of muscle memory for how we tend to think of and talk about baptism. Two theologians brought some clarity and illumination to this moment for me. The first is a man named Cyril of Jerusalem. A 4th-century bishop and theologian. He wrote,

Jesus sanctified baptism by being himself baptized, and if the Son of God was baptized, what godly man is he that despises baptism? He was baptized that he might give to them that are baptized a divine and excellent grace. And to you in like manner, after you had come up from the pool of the sacred streams, there was given an unction, an anointing, the antitype of that which Christ was anointed, and this is the Holy Spirit. Cyril of Jerusalem, 386 AD

What is Cyril saying? He's saying that Jesus' baptism changed everything about baptism. Prior to that moment, baptism was about repentance. It was about purification from sin, full stop. But Cyril would argue that when Jesus went into the waters of baptism, and the Holy Spirit of God descended on him like a dove, baptism was not doing the sanctifying in that moment. It was being sanctified. It was being made holy by Jesus, and with it came the Holy Spirit. There was a change.

Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 296–373 AD) says something similar. “When the Lord as man was washed in the Jordan, it was we who were washed in him and by him.” Now, I want you to remember why we’re talking about all of this. John’s disciples think that Jesus is doing the same thing that John is doing, but John knows something that they don’t: Jesus hasn’t come to continue John’s baptism. He’s come to transform it.

So last week, we had Communion Sunday, the Lord’s supper. Each and every one of you who were here came to the front of this room to receive. To receive communion, there were two phrases that were spoken over you. The first is, “This is the body of Christ, broken for you,” and the second is, “This is the blood of Christ that is poured out for you.” You and I both know in that moment that we ate matzah. We ate unleavened bread. We ate a cracker, and we drank grape juice. But somehow in that moment, there is this mystery of the sacrament in which we believe that Christ is there. Despite what it really is, Christ is there in that moment, and that’s incredibly analogous to what Cyril and Athanasius and much of the early church understood about the mystery and sacrament of baptism. Both of them are received by us in faith.

I want you to pay attention to this: Jesus changes everything. When you begin to see that and understand it, the opening chapters of John’s gospel become much clearer. So what I want to do for a moment is to recap what we’ve covered so far. I’m going to give a little sneak preview of where we’re going next week just to help clarify what I mean. Let’s go to the very beginning of John’s gospel. There are some changes that happens. The first one in John 1 is that Jesus changes birthrights into something greater.

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God. John 1:12-13

He’s not done. Also in John 1, starting in verse 24, Jesus changes baptism into something greater.

Now the Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” “I baptize with water,” John replied, “but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.” vv. 24-27

I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.” Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will

baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One.” vv. 31-34

In John 2, Jesus changes water into something greater. You remember this from a couple of weeks ago.

They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, “Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now.” What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. John 2:8b-11

But he’s not done. In John 3, Jesus changes birth into something greater.

Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” John 3:3-8

Keep going, Jesus changes belief into something greater.

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. John 3:14-18

That’s the first three chapters. Kevin’s going to share much more in the following weeks. But in John 4, Jesus is going to encounter somebody else, someone new, someone completely opposite, completely unlike the religious elite in Nicodemus that preceded today’s text. A person who has no resume, a person who has no earthly claims at all to salvation in the time, in the culture, and in the world in which they lived. She was a Samaritan and an adulteress. When Jesus meets her, she is thirsty. But the Jesus who changes birthrights, who changes water, and who changes belief into something greater begins to change her.

Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” John 4:13-14

Church, Jesus changes everything. We have concluded our side quest. I want to return to the end of John 3.

John's disciples are looking over at Jesus. They're looking over at Jesus' disciples, and they're confused. They came to John and said to him, “*Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him*” (John 3:26). John hears them, but I want you to listen to how he gently corrects, how he carefully begins to teach them in this moment. It says,

To this John replied, “A person can receive only what is given them from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.’ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less.” John 3:27-30

John's entire purpose, his entire identity, is changing. Jesus changes everything. But what's beautiful about this is the way in which John lays down who he has been, he lays down who he is and rejoices to become less. Church, we are all born into a culture and into a world of ambition. Put in CPC terms, we are raised up to accomplish. We are raised to accumulate from an early age. We pursue the American dream. We pursue titles, promotions, and raises. We pursue more and more followers on whatever social media platform we use. We pursue greater and greater wealth. We pursue greater and greater luxury. We pursue greater and greater security.

We believe that there is no limit to what we can and should accomplish, to what we can and should accumulate. Millions are nice, but billions are better. Billions are nice, but this week, trillions are better. There is no end to our chasing after the wind. So how strange and counterintuitive is it for this man who lived in the wilderness, ate locusts and wild honey, wore camel hair and leather belts, whose only purpose in life was to be the forerunner for Jesus, and to see that Jesus changed everything, and immediately he rejoices. He must become greater. I must become less.

Church, we talk a lot about disordered living. This is what ordered living looks like. This is what worshipful living looks like. This is what living for Jesus really looks like. So John the Apostle continues with some commentary of his own. He says,

The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts

his testimony. Whoever has accepted it has certified that God is truthful. For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them. John 3:31-36

Jesus changes everything. I don't know what might have brought you here this morning. Perhaps you are here because long ago Jesus changed everything for you. He changed everything in you. He changed you, and for that, I rejoice. That's why I'm here as well.

Perhaps you're here because you want to change. You sense a need to change. Perhaps you sense that there must be more to this life than simply running the rat race and keeping up with the Joneses. Perhaps you realize the foolishness in the idea that he who dies with the most toys wins. The reality is that we all leave the world the exact same way that we entered it, with nothing. We don't take our resumes; we don't take our clothes; we don't take our money; we don't take anything about our lives. It all stays, and it all decays.

I would imagine that there are some people here who want something more permanent, something more everlasting than that iPhone, house, car, or drug. The beauty of today's text is where it sits between two stories. Nicodemus had the resume. He had the knowledge. He had the notoriety and even more. All he could muster was a discreet curiosity about Jesus. He was simply curious. The woman at the well, whom we'll read about next week, had none of those things. She was an outcast, but she wanted more of what Jesus offered. She wanted to be changed.

I'm convinced that somewhere in those stories is an invitation to reflect. Do I see myself in Nicodemus? Do I see myself in John the Baptist? Do I see myself in the woman at the well? Do I see myself as someone who has my life together and doesn't need what Jesus offers? Or do I see myself as broken, hungry, and thirsty for something that only Jesus can quench? Jesus will change everything.

For years, I was focused on one life. I wanted to become a great architect. I wanted to create beautiful spaces where people live, dwell, and spend their time in. I did all the right things to get there. I was drafting professionally before I even graduated high school, and I continued that. I majored in architecture in college. I was realizing my dream, and it was really just a matter of when, not if, that I was going to reach that goal. But somewhere in the midst of that career, while I was sitting day after day at these computers drawing plans, Jesus began to do this subtle, slow, and steady work in my heart. He called me out of my plans and into his. He called me into ministry.

As I look back, I don't know how I managed to listen, because I'm a pretty stubborn guy, but he's craftier than I am. I remember telling Tiffany, we were engaged at the time, I said, "I'm feeling called into ministry." I only mentioned it to her because I knew that she would tell me that I was absolutely insane and there was no earthly way that we should do that. Then I would realize that these are crazy thoughts I was having, and I would move on. But she didn't. She said, "Okay. Let's do it."

I cannot begin to tell you how unlikely that was for either one of us. We were not that young Christian couple who you've seen who were so on fire for Jesus, and we wanted to go to the ends of the earth to serve him wherever he called us. You've known those couples. We were not that couple. But Jesus has a way of changing everything. What he wants to change and will change is different for each and every one of us.

You may be called out of addiction. You may be called out of a career. You may be called out of the country. Whatever it looks like, you will be called out of your life and into the life that he has planned for you. Whatever it looks like, he must become greater, and I must become less. I have to tell you that my flesh fights that every single day. There will always be a version of me mistakenly pursuing more accomplishment, more accumulation, but I know I'm pursuing vapor when I do it. Jesus changes everything. He must become greater. I must become less.

So if you sense that Jesus wants change in you, that he is calling you, I want to encourage you right now to be attentive and sensitive to his voice, sensitive to the work that he is doing in you.