

While serving as the coordinator for Senior High programs, at Luther Park Bible Camp, on the shores of Lake Superior, at Buffalo Bay, Red Cliff Native American Reservation, near Bayfield, I met him. The onsite contact for our mission trip.

This old guy named, Jim, was playing guitar and teaching us about the reservation. His wife was a pastor in the UCC church, while he was a pastor in the ELCA. In fact, he served at the large downtown church in my hometown of Rice Lake, from 1983-1986 – but I never knew him. We were members out at the country church.

But during the week I called my dad to see if he knew him. My dad knows most people in Rice Lake. “Pastor Jim Kasperson...from Bethany Lutheran...yeah he baptized you.”

What?!?! I was astounded.

“Dad...I’m working with him this week at Buffalo Bay!”

I was baptized at the church where Pastor Jim served – and then our family moved out to the rural church.

21 years later...I met him for the second time.

I share that story with a lot of families that come for baptism. You never know when you might run into the pastor who held you and poured water on your head.

I would love to hear a story like that about the Messiah's baptism...but unfortunately from Luke, all we get is a story about John. The Baptist. The prophet. The cousin. Sure it is a good story...but

John baptizes, repents, teaches...but he is not the one.

John flips the script – share your food, share your coat, stop being selfish he commands...but he is not the one.

John engages outsiders – soldiers and tax collectors – but he is not the one.

John teaches...but he is not the one.

John prophesies -but he knows he is not the one.

And at the baptism of Jesus...John is...absent. All this talk about John...all these verses, and at the most important part...he's gone.

As Luke writes it in the narrative, John is in jail.

The actual chronological time of events – no one is sure. I have no idea if John was really there. If he was the one to baptize Jesus. If it was done in the Jordan. But for our purpose of the gospel – it doesn't matter.

Or it does matter. John's absence tells us something. He sets the story, but he is not the story.

The story we hear is the dove. The spirit. The word. The presence of God is the story.

Baptism is initiated by God. Performed by God. What matters is God. Everything else is secondary.

When we focus on the theatre of baptism, we forget the meaning.

Baptism is not God's story of salvation. Salvation is given to the world – not earned by something we do. Yes, we join Jesus in that death and resurrection through baptism. In baptism, we celebrate our part in God's story. Baptism is not a one play act – it is living out the promise.

God is bigger than baptism. God works through us, in us, around us – whether or not a pastor stood with us at the font and lighting a candle.

Baptism isn't about who sprinkles you.

Baptism is more than holy water being poured on our head, and babies being paraded around church.

Did you know that you can be baptized without water, without a pastor? And you can lead a baptized life – without ever having set foot in a church?

We know this because Jesus' own baptism in Luke – has no baptizer. Non-specific crowds are gathered. The focus is God. John sets the stage telling us the one to come is better than I...because God is the story.

John set the stage for Jesus, by challenging the crowd, and their traditions. They believed they had a special covenant because of Abraham, and nothing else mattered. But John challenged them on how they lived out the promise.

People believed they had God's promise, they were superior insiders, full of themselves. And they neglected neighbors considered outside the promise.

Some churches, and church people act in the same way. We make faith solely about getting baptized, so we go to heaven. Why do we focus on death, when baptism is about life? Not the afterlife, but whole life, life now, today.

Baptism is a promise for right now. That is what is meant by eternal life. How we live out baptism provides its meaning; the reason we do baptism at all.

Baptism is for us to go and love and serve and change the world – because of what God does for us.

Baptism is a gift, so that others will experience a loving God. It's not about me getting a spot in heaven, or reserved seat at the table.

How selfish of me to believe that baptism is for my salvation.

Baptism isn't a ceremony for chosen ones who get inclusion into a private society. We can stop worry about who is in and who is out – and instead live baptized lives, be God's story, and let God be God.

Baptism helps to guide us, forms us, gives us a foundation for ministry – but it doesn't make us loved children of God. That is done in creation. And somehow that has been lost in translation.

Jesus' baptism changes the story, a new chapter where we experience how God deals with humankind. God engages creation, to bring wholeness and restoration. God baptizes...so that we live in this new harmony, this new reality with God and all humankind.

Baptism is for a saved life now.

Saved from sinful, selfish desires. Saved to serve others, without reservation – because we are served by God.

Baptism changes us for the world today.

Baptized to be disciples.

To follow. To learn. To serve.

To Love your neighbor and God. And yourself.

Unabashedly and without shame.

We are washed of sin – so that we live God's holy in us. We are the ones who get to point to God's story in Jesus. That is good news!

As much as I celebrated meeting the pastor that baptized me – it was a pretty cool God moment – it changes nothing. It isn't about us.

Whether you remember your baptism or not, the pastor or not (even if it is me), whether you were baptized with water from the Jordan, or tap water from the faucet – or if the pastor messed up your kids name...

Or whether you aren't baptized at all – God empowers you to live a life of grace in service to others, because you are a child of God, loved, forgiven. God says so. And God has made you part of this story.