

There's a scene in the book "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" where she meets the Caterpillar. The Caterpillar looks at Alice and asks, "Who are you?" And Alice replies, "I don't even know anymore. I thought I knew who I was when I woke up this morning. But I've changed so many times since then." He tells her to explain herself. And she replies, "I can't explain myself because I'm not myself."

Have you ever had that feeling? You thought you knew who you were when you got up in the morning. But by the end of the day, so much has happened and you've changed so many times, you don't know who you are anymore. You're just not yourself.

It happens for lots of reasons. Occasionally for good ones. You learn something new. You accomplish something you never thought you could accomplish. You end the day with joy or peace or contentment. That's great.

But that can feel pretty rare. Honestly, we're more likely to end the day feeling bewildered and confused about who we are when something bad happens. When we have a moment of profound disappointment. When we miserably fail in a way that hurts ourselves or others. When we end the day frustrated or alone or afraid.

I think psychologists call it an "identity crisis." You're just not the person you thought you were. You woke up as one person and by the end of the day, you realize, that's just not who you are. And to put this in Biblical terms, you'll often find that you're a lot more sinful than the person you imagined yourself to be.

The Jews during the time of John the Baptist were going through a bit of an identity crisis like this. They woke up in the morning thinking of themselves in one way: as God's people.

They were the descendants of Abraham, the great nation promised to the patriarch long ago. They were the followers of Moses, obedient to God's law. They were the servants of David, a man who could slay giants. They were the kingdom of Solomon, in all his wisdom and glory and wealth. They were Israel. And they could do anything.

But they had changed so much. They had gone through civil war. They had been conquered and reconquered and conquered again. They had been sent into exile in a foreign land. They had been subjugated by a pagan emperor.

Some of them refused to acknowledge how much they had changed. The Pharisees and the chief priests and the teachers of the Law seemed bent on pretending that they were still the same Israel that had conquered the Promised Land.

But many realized that they were not themselves anymore. That they had changed too much, too many times, and not for the better. That they were, in fact, a lot more sinful than they once imagined themselves to be.

And so, *"John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins."*

These people came out to John and he asked them point blank, "Who are you?" And they replied, "We're disappointments. We're failures. We're frustrated and afraid and alone. We don't know who we are. All we know is that we're sinners."

And John said, "You're right. You are. Come. Repent. Be baptized. Confess your sins. Hear of God's forgiveness."

"But know this: I can't change who you are. I can't give you a new identity. You need the one who is coming. The one who is more powerful than I. You think I'm so great, but I'm not worthy to tie that man's shoes. I baptize you with water. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

That's what they needed. That's what we need. Someone to give us a new identity. Because no matter who we think we are, deep down our primary identity from birth is simply "sinner."

We hate hearing it, but it's true. And we try everything we can think of to cover it up. We give ourselves all sorts of false identities, in the hopes that no one will see that sinful person buried inside of us. In the hopes that we can forget how corrupt we are.

And so we make our job our identity. And focus on how proud we are of our income or title. We make our family our identity. And focus on how loved we are by our spouse and children. We make our community our identity. And focus on how respected and admired we are by all those around us.

We even sometimes make our sin our identity. We say that what is wrong is right. And we're proud of it. Our lust. Our greed. Our hate. Our selfishness. There are a lot of people who have twisted God's Law completely inside out and upside down. Just so that they can embrace that which is most shameful in themselves. Just so that they don't have to admit that they are sinners.

Our identity is a powerful thing. The person you think you are when you wake up in the morning shapes everything you do during the day. And the person you become by the time you go to bed can crush you with guilt or twist you into self-righteousness.

Which is why we need one who is more powerful than any of us alone. More powerful than Abraham or Moses or David or Solomon. More powerful than John the Baptist. We need someone who can give us a new identity.

Someone with the power to say, "Let there be light," and there was light. Someone whose word doesn't just describe. It creates. Out of nothing. Out of that big formless void of darkness and sin that dwells in each one of us.

And so, *"Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opening and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."*

That's what a proper identity looks like. The beloved Son of God. A person who pleases God the Father in all circumstances. A person anointed with the Holy Spirit.

That's what we all want to hear. That's what we all want to wake up with in the morning and go to bed with at night. That's what we want to say when someone asks us to explain ourselves.

And that's exactly what we each receive. Because Jesus didn't need to be told that. He knew that he was the Son of God. He knew that the Father was pleased with him. He knew that the Holy Spirit was upon him.

Jesus received all that because that's what we need to receive. For, as Paul says, we have been baptized into Christ Jesus. His baptism is our baptism. His identity is our identity.

By baptism, you are the beloved child of God. By baptism, the Father is pleased with you. By baptism, you are anointed with the Holy Spirit. By baptism, you are united with Christ.

Such that even in death, you cannot be separated from him. And his resurrection is your resurrection. So consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Dead to your old identity. Dead to all those false identities that you try to hide behind. Dead to that sinfulness that you so desperately try to justify.

You are more than your job. More than your family. More than your community. More than your lust and greed and hate and selfishness.

Who are you? You are a child of God, set free from sin to walk in newness of life. In this life and the next. For death has no hold over you.

The one who first made you has remade you. He knows who you are. Better than even you do. And in baptism, you are yourself. The way that God always wanted you to be. Amen.