

"Baptism Celebration"  
April 7, 2024 | Pastor John Stickl

Pastor Jason Hillier: That is Jesus. He is holy. He is above all. He is lifted high. He is worthy of our worship and He is worthy of our lives. So, go ahead and find your seat for me. Now I just want to take a moment and welcome everybody to Valley Creek. My name is Jason. I serve as the campus pastor here in Valley Creek. We are one church that meets on multiple campuses and we carry the hope of Jesus to thousands of locations. We want you to know, hope is here, everyone is welcome and Jesus really does change everything. So, thanks for being here today. If you are newer with us, we want to just welcome you here. We would love to meet you before you leave today. But, it is an exciting weekend. We just had an amazing Easter last weekend where we got to celebrate the love of God. We got to declare out the deepest question of all of heart: Am I loved? And the answer is resounding, "In Jesus, yes. You are loved." And so, today, we get to celebrate so many people who have come to receive and realize the love of Jesus as we get to celebrate baptisms here at Valley Creek Church. But not just a few baptisms, we get to celebrate 206 people stepping into the waters of baptism, 206 people. That is the most baptisms ever at Valley Creek Church. The most people we have ever gotten to see walk into the waters. We are going to get to celebrate 53 just during this service. And so, every single Circle leader who leads someone, that is why you lead them. Everybody who serves in kids and students and serves the Next Gen, this is what it looks like to see them step into the waters and declare Jesus is Lord.

And so really, here's what is happening today. Check this out in 2 Corinthians 5. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old is gone, the new has come." We are not even connected to our old realities. We are transformed in the name of Jesus. And so, baptism is a symbol of that transformation. It is an outward symbol of an inward change. And there are so many stories of people who have been changed by the love of Jesus like, story after story after story. I can tell you a story of someone who just last weekend, they came up to pray for somebody after the Easter services. And as they were praying and basically realized, "I have never actually received Jesus as my Lord." And so they said "yes" to Jesus as Lord and they are getting baptized today, one week later. I tell you another story of my friend Renee who has been in church for 60+ years and so she is very familiar with the story of Jesus.

But, she was not really familiar with the grace of Jesus, and she hadn't really received that until recently in her life. So, after 60 years of following God and saying, "Yes, I know about God," she has chosen to say, "No, no, no I am going to make Jesus Lord of my life. I am going to follow Him into the waters of baptism." Here is the best part. So, she flew in from our online campus from Rhode Island to get baptized today. She is here to celebrate new life in Jesus. Here is another story. So, there is somebody named Paige, 16 years old. She led the charge in her family during a very difficult season in her family to say, "When I am following Jesus, I think, we, family, should follow Jesus. I think we should make Him the Lord of our life and start to a base everything we do, rearrange, and arrange your life around the person of Jesus." And so her family kind of, they watch the transformation happening in her. And today, I am happy to tell you that she will baptize her sister, her mom, and her dad in the waters of baptism, because that is what happens when you are a new creation. It changes things. It opens up things in your

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life. You literally awaken to the hope of Jesus. And so what is going to happen in just a few moments is, you're going to see people walk into the waters and they are going to declare that they are a new creation. They are going to follow what it talks about in Matthew 28, check this out, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you and surely I am with you always to the very end of the age." So, in just a moment, two people are going to step into the waters, one baptizing, one being baptized. They are going to ask the question, "Is Jesus Lord and will you follow?" To which, the answer is, "Yes, Jesus is Lord and I will follow." And then based on what it says here, they are going to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. That is, they are going to be baptized into the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the power of the Holy Spirit. And they are going to be taught to live life as a disciple, to begin to obey Jesus that is we don't – none of us got it all figured out. We are not all put together. We are learning to obey. We are being taught by the teacher. We are starting to follow Jesus and realize that when He is with us, surely He is with us always, to the very end of the age. And so that's what we are going to be celebrating.

I just want to be really clear. These tanks are full of water. There is nothing special about this water. This is plain all tap water. There is something very special and profound about obeying Jesus. And so we celebrate each and every one of them. And here is how we do it at Valley Creek. At Valley Creek, we celebrate by singing and worshiping as the person is getting baptized. Why? Because we believe that all of heaven rejoices when even one person comes to a faith in Jesus, comes to obey Jesus, comes to follow Jesus, and so we celebrate each and every one of them. So, when they come up out of that water, they are buried and dead to their old life. They are raised to new life, a symbol of being buried and died in Jesus and into their sins and raised to new life resurrection life in Jesus. And so, we celebrate as soon as they come up out of the water, "Yaaa!" and we go for it and we celebrate each and every one of them because their story matters because Jesus is doing something amazing in each and every one of them. So, what does that mean for you? That means that you got to pick up some perseverance a little bit, because 53 people in one service is a lot of people to cheer for. But the last one is just as important as the first, and the moms, and the dads, and the children, and the families, and the generational change that we are seeing in the waters of baptism, that is worth celebrating. So we'll be worshiping. They'll be going to the water. We'll be celebrating each and every one of them. But, as we get ready to celebrate each one, I am going to invite the baptizees to go ahead and stand up here, get ready to walk into the waters. As we celebrate each one of them, I just want you to know this. This is what a movement of hope looks like. This is why we are the church. This is why we are the people of God. This is why we celebrate each and every one. So, may we celebrate them to the fullness of the kingdom, may we recognize this is life change on display, and this is why we do what we do and are who we are, this is what a movement of hope looks like. Come on. Let us get ready to celebrate each one in the name of Jesus.

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Come on, come on, what if we just gave the Lord a shout of praise over life change? Lord, You deserve the praise. We lift up our voices. We lift up our lives. We lift up our hands and we give You the praise for what You are doing in lives, and in people, and in families. You deserve that praise. So it takes a moment and even just pray a blessing over those of you who were baptized. So maybe if you have the faith, man, maybe you can just raise your hand as a sign of faith to them. We just pray a blessing over each and every one of them, in the name of Jesus. May today be the very beginning of a life of following. The very beginning of seeing, the God's kingdom never ends. In your life, in the generations of your family, in your future, He is with you, He is for you. And so as you learn, as you are taught to obey, as you become more and more like Jesus, as you follow Him and you arrange and you rearrange your life to make him the Lord of everything. But, you know that you do not do that alone. You do it with the church family. And you do it with the people of God, surrounding you and praying for you and declaring life over you so may you receive every blessing in the spiritual realm in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Pastor John Stickl: So, come on Valley Creek, that is what a movement of hope for the city and beyond looks like. 206 people getting baptized. 206 people who believe the message of the cross is not foolishness, but they believe it is the power of God for salvation, and that's what you just experienced, them being saved and being raised to a new life in Jesus with a restored identity, reconciled relationship, and a redeemed purpose in Jesus' name.

You see, our vision as a church is to be a movement of hope for the city and beyond. A movement, a bunch of unique people from different backgrounds, and experiences, and walks of life, and seasons of life coming together and submitting their gifts, and their passions, and their talents, and their time, and their energy, and their efforts, and their life to a common vision for an exponential return. A bunch of individuals who choose to submit and surrender to Jesus and become a part of the body of Christ; to do His work in the here and now. A movement of hope. Hope is not an emotion or a feeling or wishful thinking. Hope is a person and his name is Jesus. And our hope is in Jesus. It is in the gospel. It is in His kingdom. It is in His finished work. For the city and beyond, because we do not exist for ourselves.

We want to see His kingdom come and His will be done in our city and beyond. And when you choose to contribute, in any way that you choose to contribute, you are a part of this movement of hope for the city and beyond. Every time you give, every time you serve, every time you lead, and love, and pray, and invite, every time you give up a preference and an opinion, every time you refuse to be offended, every time we serve on a team, engage in a Circle, come to a Tuesday Night Prayer gathering, create culture on the weekend. Every time you choose to contribute, God is doing something in you as He is doing something through you. You are a part of the body of Christ. And each one of you is a part of it and it takes all of us to do the works God has asked us as individuals to do, for us to become mature, attaining the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. It takes all of us to be a movement of hope for the city and beyond. You see the resurrected Jesus has commanded us, His church, the body of

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Christ, to therefore go and make disciples. And that is what you are seeing of these 206 people. Today they have decided to become a disciple of Jesus, a learner, a student, a follower, one who becomes like the one they are following. They have evaluated their life. They have counted the cost. They have considered their ways, and they believe that Jesus is the best way – that He is the only way – and they've decided to live their life a different way and take the narrow road, choosing to have a vision to become like Jesus. "Therefore, go and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Yes, we just baptize them in water. But, more importantly, we're baptizing, immersing them in the name or the reality of the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the power of the Holy Spirit. And now, we get to teach them "to obey everything Jesus has commanded us." In other words, they are learning to follow, learning to obey, learning to submit and surrender their life to Jesus and His truth and His way.

And what I'd love is that when you look at these 206 people today, you can just see it, can't you? You can see their passion. You can see their faith. You can see their obedience. You can see this deep hunger and thirst for God. You can see their desire for more of Him. You can see the kingdom of God at work in their life. And so the question I want to ask you is, if we looked at your life today, would we see those same things? If we looked at you, would we see passion and faith, obedience, a deep hunger and thirst for God, His kingdom at work in your life? See, Jesus says, "You will be known by your fruit." A good tree can't produce bad fruit and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. Whatever is at the root is the fruit that will be produced in your life. And so if you look at the fruit, or the outward workings of your life, what does it tell you about what's going on inside of here? Would the external realities of your life tell us that there is the life of God moving in here?

You see, the reason we do baptisms publicly and not, like, privately at a pool somewhere off on our own, is because when baptisms happen, there is really three things that take place. There is a declaration, there is an invitation, and there is an examination. When we do baptisms publicly, what happens is the person getting baptized is making a declaration. They are declaring that Jesus is Lord, that they are disciples, that they are following Him, and they are making that declaration to their friends and their family, to the body of Christ, to the church of Jesus, to the city, to the world, to the powers and principalities and the spiritual realm. They are declaring that Jesus is their Lord, and they have chosen to follow Him. The second thing that happens is there is an invitation that is given to everyone who has not been baptized, to everyone who has not yet put their faith in Jesus. You see, when you are watching other people be baptized, there is an invitation given from Jesus Himself, whomsoever will shall come, may come. When we watch other people go into the waters of baptism, it reminds us that they were lost, lonely, and broken, and they are now saved, healed, set free and delivered, and I can be saved, healed, set free and delivered in Jesus' name. And so, if you are here and you haven't been baptized, and you are watching the work of God in their life, it is an invitation for you. Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." This life is here, and available for you today. Today is your day of salvation. And then, there is an

examination. You see, every person who has already been baptized, every time we watch someone else get baptized, it's an invitation for us to examine our own life. As we see what God's doing in their life, we are reminded that we have chosen to be baptized, that we have already decided to be a disciple. And so, the Bible teaches us to examine our ways and test them and when we are in a baptism experience, whether we realize it or not, as we are watching other people baptized, if we've been baptized, there is an examination of our own life that is taking place. And if you've been baptized, the question then you have to examine is, am I living like I have been baptized? Am I living like I'm a new creation? Am I living like the old is gone and the new has come? Am I living like I'm dead to sin but alive to God in Christ? Am I living like I am the righteousness of God? Am I living like I'm a beloved son? Am I living like I have crucified my flesh with Christ and it's the Spirit of God who now lives within me? Am I living like I am actually a disciple? Because before I can get baptized, I have to decide to be a disciple and then as I have been baptized, I have now made a decision to learn to obey. So if you have been baptized, can I ask you the question, what are you learning to obey in your life right now? Where is Jesus teaching you His way? And where are you submitting and surrendering to it? See, it doesn't matter if you got baptized 20 years ago if you're not living like a disciple today. It kind of misses the point, doesn't it? Make disciples. Baptize them, and then teach them to obey. So today is a great day to examine our own life. There is fruit of a desire of obedience, and hunger, and thirst for the very things of God. And that is why today is a celebration, that is why it is a gift, that's the body of Christ. You see, next week, we're going to jump back into our Different Way series, this series that we have been in, about talking about doing the things that Jesus did, so we can do the things that Jesus did, with the assumption that we are disciples and we long to learn to obey.

And so next week, when we gather together, really, it's kind of two groups of people. One is you are still considering whether or not you want to be a disciple of Jesus. I have not yet been baptized or decided I want to follow Him, but a whole lot of us here, we have already been baptized, which means you have already made the choice to be a disciple of Jesus, which means you are now spending your life learning to obey. Jesus invites you to follow Him, not just once, but over, and over, and over, and over, and over, and over, and over, and over again. And today, as we watch a move of God in 206 people's lives, it reminds us that God already has and already is moving in my life. The only question is, am I moving in response to what He has done and what He is doing? And am I learning to obey in the here and now? This is called the journey of faith. And this is why we do what we do, and why we want to be who we want to be. We are hungry and thirsty for God. We long for more of his presence. We want to see His kingdom come and we need Him to do a deep work inside of us. You see, we want to be a movement of hope for the city and beyond because God is moving, God has moved, and God is going to continue to move. And so, we move because God has moved, and we move because we want to see God move even more. And that's who we are as a church and that's the direction that we are going; learning to obey the things that Jesus taught us as disciples of Jesus, living a different way. And may today build your faith that God is at work and may that passion, and that hunger, and that faith, and that obedience that you see in the lives of the

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people who got baptized today, may that be true of your life today and tomorrow and in the weeks to come in Jesus' name.

This is what a movement of hope for the city and beyond looks like. So Jesus, today we celebrate. We celebrate the message of the cross, for it is not foolishness, it is the power of God for salvation. Thank You, Jesus, that You saved me. You restored my identity, and reconciled my relationship with God, and redeemed my purpose. Thank you that today, 206 people have been included in Christ. They are a part of Your kingdom. Thank You for their passion, and their faith, and their obedience, that reminds me that You are at work in their life and it reminds me that You have been at work in my life. And so, I pray for every person here today who has yet to put their faith in Jesus and be baptized. Holy Spirit, would You continue to draw with love and kindness and grace. May they have eyes to see and ears to hear who You are. And I pray for every person today who has been baptized, may we live like we actually have been baptized, like we actually are a new creation, a disciple of Jesus, learning to obey, and may we have the faith to follow You to the new places You want us to go. Jesus, we choose a different way because the narrow road is the way to life. So lead us, Lord, one step at a time. Thank You for the body of Christ. Thank You for the celebration. Thank You that we get to be the privilege of being a movement of hope for the city and beyond in this time in our life, in the here and now, in the Jesus' name we pray. Amen.