

In the Beginning:

We are very familiar with the beginning of the story of Jesus.

The Gospel of Luke starts with the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist, followed by the announcement of the birth of Jesus and finally the famous Christmas story with manger, angels and shepherds.

The Gospel of Matthew tells the genealogy of Jesus, followed by the well-known stories of the wise men from the east, Herod, the killing of the innocents and the flight of the small family.

The Gospel of John begins with a mysterious song. It goes:  
In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.  
Later it continues with: And the Word became flesh.

But actually: What is the beginning of the Gospel of Mark?  
Mark's Gospel begins with the baptism of Jesus.

Even that's a start.

We should have a closer look at this beginning.

First of all, it is indeed strange that John goes into the desert to baptize.

Who would baptize in the desert?

Well, there is the river Jordan,

but he could have done it at the Sea of Galilee, for example.

Or the Dead Sea.

Only: That would be probably not very suitable.

For John, you have to make your move. You have to decide.

There's no take-away baptism. Because there is not take-away conversion.

With a closer look at Mark's telling you'll find that important elements of God's history with mankind and of his way with Israel also occur here:  
The desert, the loss of paradise, the burdens of mankind, the fall from god.  
The flood that beats up over their heads, with those saved, who trust in god.  
Even a pigeon occurs in the flood story.  
The liberation from slavery, including the long trek through the desert.  
The promise of a future in the land beyond the Jordan.  
God's word of judgment and grace, as preached by the prophets.  
God's covenant with his people.

All these elements are told to show:

Jesus is one of them.

As a human being as well as a Jew he's part of this story and of this history.

When John asks why Jesus wants to be baptized, Jesus therefore says:  
for righteousness' sake.

But: What is righteousness here?

Justice, so that everyone gets what he deserves?

That no one will get ripped off?

No. In the kingdom of God, righteousness is something different:

It is the government program of God.

So it is Doing the will of God.

So is it simply obedience?

It's not as simple as that, because it is not because of obedience as such, but because of God's will.

All over the complex and intricate history of mankind, God is determined to one thing: his love. He wants everybody to have an as close relationship with him as possible, so that his creation might live in peace. This is why he makes a covenant with Israel: being loyal to each other and to God, they might prosper, because God is faithful to his people. But unlike us, God remains faithful. Even when we fall apart.

Precisely for this reason, John calls to repent. For that very reason, Jesus makes the story of Israel his own. Therefore, it comes to a reversal, Therefore it comes to baptism, Therefore, it comes to a new life. Thus, the good news in the Gospel of Mark, start with his baptism:

Because Jesus proves his loyalty with God.  
Because Jesus proves his loyalty with the common people and God's history with mankind.  
Because God proves his loyalty to Jesus.  
This is why God says audibly: this is my beloved Son, with him I am well pleased.

To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, as does Jesus in his first preaching in Nazareth, sufferers and poor should have a future from now on. Also in Luke the angels sing of the peace to those on whom his favor rests.

With the baptism of Jesus it is clear:  
Jesus represents the people with all their faults and weaknesses and in all their troubles.  
At the same time Jesus represents God.  
That God and man can find one another in a spirit empowered relationship is not hindered by transgression or self-righteousness:  
THIS is what pleases God.

This implicates that we can get along with ourselves.  
And all things can be eliminated  
that prevent us from living in peace with other people and  
that prevent us to live our lives with God.  
They can be eliminated in a way  
that they no longer determine our lives.  
So when John says:  
You have to change your life.  
Then Jesus proves him right.  
But Jesus goes beyond that:  
You need live this change!  
And God proves him right.