

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Mark 1:4-11 (NRSV)

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. [5] And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

[6] Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. [7] He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. [8] I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

[9] In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. [10] And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. [11] And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

BAPTISM HISTORY

Today we're going to talk about two baptisms, the baptism of John and the baptism of Jesus. And through our discussion I hope that we can begin to understand why the sacrament of baptism lies at the heart of who we are and what we believe as disciples of Jesus.

Baptism, of course, was the hallmark of John's ministry. John was called a "baptizer." That's his title.

But, it's important to note that baptism was not something that John invented. It was practiced first by the Jews. Gentiles who decided to convert to the Jewish faith underwent an elaborate ritual that sometimes included baptism in a river.

This baptism was something that the converts performed for themselves. They essentially took a bath, a cleansing baptism that represented a cleansing of the convert's soul. It was a sign of this person's new found faith, a kind of rebirth if you will.

But, it was a faith built upon what they could choose and do for themselves. They had to "clean up their act" before they could convert. Some people still look at baptism in this way. But, Christian baptism is not about cleaning up our act. Christian baptism is about the power of God reaching down to us. Christian baptism is about God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

JOHN'S BAPTISM

The baptism of John illustrates this important difference. His baptism differed in two important ways from the Jewish rite.

First, those baptized did not give themselves a bath in the river. They were baptized, they were bathed by John. It was something that was done for them. This was something that they could not do for themselves. Only God

could cleanse them of their sin. Only God could point them in a new direction.

And second, John did not baptize converts into the Jewish faith. Instead, John baptized members of the Jewish community. It was as a way of preparing them for a new way of life, a way of life that was coming from above.

They were baptized in preparation for a kingdom that would soon come, not to become a part of a kingdom that already existed.

John's baptism was not based upon what God in Christ was about to do for them. In light of that coming kingdom, they were encouraged to repent, and baptism was a sign of that repentance.

REPENTANCE

I always use the New Year as a time to rededicate myself to those things that I know should be done and yet have neglected. I make a list of people I need to see and tasks that need to be performed.

In a sense that's repentance.

Looking back over the last year, I realize that time is short. I need to set priorities in my life. I need to make a personal decision to go in a different direction in the coming year.

It is an admission of guilt, but it is more than just "feeling sorry" for what I've done. It is a willingness to step out in faith and say, "With God's help things can change in my life. God has the power to make me into a different person, and I'm going to take that first step."

In a spiritual sense, this is what those baptized by John had determined to do. Those baptized by John admitted that their priorities were wrong; those

baptized by John admitted that in light of the Kingdom of God which was coming soon they needed to go in a different direction.

John pointed them toward God and God's law. John said, "Live up to your spiritual heritage. You are God's chosen people. Act like it. Change your ways. Repent! And keep one eye on the sky. There is salvation coming from above that is greater than any of us can imagine."

PREPARING THE WAY

Apparently John's preaching was very popular.

The Scripture tells us that "the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." (Mark 1:5)

There was a reason that John's preaching and baptisms were so well received. People understood his ministry as a fulfillment of prophecy. People believed that he was the one whom the prophet Isaiah talked about, the "voice of one crying in the wilderness," the one who would prepare the way for the Lord.

And so the call to repentance was not a burden but a hope. The people believed that they truly could change. The people could go in a different direction because God was doing something new. The kingdom was coming. Repentance was good news.

John was clear. He was not the Messiah. His call to repent and be baptized was just the first act in a greater drama. He was preparing the way for the One who was more powerful. John said that he was not worthy to even untie the shoelaces of this coming Messiah.

Furthermore, the One who was coming would baptize the people in a new way.

John baptized the people with water, but the One who was coming would baptize the people with the Holy Spirit. As the Spirit came down from heaven and presided over the first creation, so God's Spirit was going to come down again and bring about a new creation.

THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

John was a very convincing preacher. People came from all over to be baptized. And Jesus also came. He too was baptized by John in the Jordan River.

And that's the curious thing about our lesson for today.

In Mark's gospel no one seems to notice Jesus. Mark simply says that Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan. The powerful Messiah that John preached about was literally right under his nose, but John doesn't acknowledge him. His identity seems to be hidden from the one who prepared the way.

In Mark's gospel, this is a theme that runs throughout the story. We, the readers know because Mark tells us in the very first sentence of his gospel that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. (Mark 1:1)

But, everyone in the story doesn't seem to get it. The Messiah, God's own Son is not recognized, at least not at first. His identity is revealed only gradually, and even those closest to him are not sure about Jesus. Jesus just doesn't fit their Messiah mold; Jesus doesn't fit their idea of what it means to be a Savior.

After all, if Jesus were the Messiah, the sinless Son of God, why in the world was he baptized by John? John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. Jesus didn't need to repent.

It is a great irony. The powerful Messiah predicted by John humbles himself and is baptized right along with the other sinners in the river that day.

This posed a great theological problem for the early church. Some of the other gospels attempt to explain it, but Mark simply states that it happened. Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River. What kind of Messiah humbles himself in this way? How can the Son of God be identified with sinners?

IDENTIFYING WITH SINNERS

Actually, when you think about it, the baptism of Jesus is yet another explanation of the incarnation; it's yet another way to tell the Christmas story. Jesus, the Son of God identifies with sinners as a way to kick off his ministry.

While we are in our sin and misery, God in Christ comes to meet us. Jesus is right there with us in the cold waters of the Jordan, and Jesus is right there with us in the cold waters of life's struggles as well.

A while back there was a picture in the newspaper. Twenty five young men in high school had shaved their heads and were posing for the camera. Now you might think that this was some strange new fraternity, but you would be wrong.

It seems that one of the young men, a sixteen year old by the name of Mark Busse was undergoing chemotherapy. His hair had fallen out and his classmates didn't want him to feel out of place.

So, they all shaved their heads.

Mark's friends were not sick, but they took one of the symptoms of Mark's sickness upon themselves as an expression of solidarity and love.

It seems to me that this is, in a much greater way, what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. God has taken upon himself our sorrows and sins.

That's what the baptism of Jesus is all about.

Jesus is God's Son. Jesus is, as John said, a powerful One who is over all.

But, Jesus didn't choose to use his power to control us or punish us. Jesus used his power to lower himself to our level, to take on our sin and suffering. Jesus humbled himself and became one of us. Jesus became a servant of all.

As the Apostle Paul put it,

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” 2 Corinthians 5:21

There is great mystery in this story from beginning to end. How can this be? How could a God of power reveal Himself in weakness? How could sins be placed upon a sinless one?

But, the baptism of Jesus makes it clear that it is true. God chooses to reveal Himself in a very human way. In this man Jesus we have the unique revelation of God and God's message of salvation for the world.

HEAVEN CAME DOWN

The Scripture tells us that as Jesus came up out of the water all heaven breaks loose.

He saw the heavens ripped open.

He saw the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove.

And he heard a voice that proclaimed,

“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

The baptism of Jesus sets the tone for the rest of his life. Counted with sinners in baptism, he would die as a sinner on the cross. As he rose from the water one day he would rise from the grave.

Toward the end of Mark's gospel we will read about an event that will remind us of this day of baptism. The sins of the world will be placed upon a crucified Jesus.

A Roman Centurion, the man in charge of the crucifixion will say what the voice from heaven said at the beginning, "Surely this man was God's Son."

And just as the skies were torn apart at his baptism, the veil in the temple will be torn apart. No longer would the holy of holies in the temple be off limits.

In Jesus God had come to live among his people.
In Jesus the power of the holy invaded humanity.

And the world would never be the same again.

I AM BAPTIZED

When the great reformer, Martin Luther was tempted to doubt, he would console himself by saying, "I am baptized." It's interesting to note that Luther didn't say "I am a Christian" or "I believe."

The source of his hope was in his baptism, that time when God reached down and called him. It was a sign of pure grace.

We all have those days when everyone is losing their heads and blaming it on us. It may be true or it may not be true. But, all those accusations have a way of taking a toll on us. The world is telling us in so many words, "You're a nobody." And sometimes we believe what they tell us. We live according to their expectations.

I've often wondered what it would be like to be a part of the witness relocation program. You've probably heard about those folks who testify against dangerous mobsters and then need to be given a new identity so they won't be killed.

Their life is totally changed in an instant. They have a new social security number, a new and different job, a new physical appearance and a new home.

I'm sure that quite often they want to go back to their old life, their real life, to be who they really are instead of living a lie.

I think that sometimes we are like those folks in the witness relocation program. Sometimes because of the pressure of outside forces or out of a desire to please people, we begin to act like somebody else. We assume an identity and a set of values that are not our own.

Baptism is a reminder of our true identity and our true home.

We do not believe what the world often tells us.

We are somebody, not because we have done great things or because we are always right. We are somebody because God has called us. We are baptized.

BAPTIZED BY THE SPIRIT

As the Spirit descended upon Christ, so the Spirit descends upon us as well. The Bible tells us that we are baptized with the Spirit of Christ, a Spirit of power that changes us from the inside out. We are God's adopted children. God forgives us and enables us to repent, to do what we could not do on our own ... go in a different direction.

I said last week that there is a kind of arrogance in many of our New Year's resolutions. Usually we make those resolutions according to our own desires and needs. It is as if we are trying to pull ourselves up by the bootstraps.

We act as if we can save ourselves by just trying a little harder. We might make some progress at first, but at year's end we usually find ourselves in the same old comfortable rut.

But, if our resolutions come as a result of recommitting ourselves to God, if we allow our priorities to be shaped by God's will instead of our will, then there is great value in making those resolutions. New Year's resolutions can be a profound spiritual exercise.

We are willing to strive, even in the face of great odds because we believe that the Spirit of God in Christ is loose in this world. What we cannot do for ourselves God can do for us.

The prophet Zechariah put it in a nutshell long ago, “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord.”

In a world that seeks change through might and power, we are called to remember the baptism of our Lord. He humbly identified with sinners.

Indeed, he took our sin upon himself.
And in so doing the heavens were opened and the Spirit of God descended.

We need to follow in his footsteps. Our world will not be changed by might and force. Our world will be changed by selfless acts of courage and service.

The pressure will be great to act in a different way, but do not succumb to the pressure.

Remember your baptism.
Remember that you are somebody.
Remember that you are a child of God.

We can go in a different direction because the Bible tells us that those who are “baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” (Galatians 3:26-27)

Repent and look toward the heavens.
God can come into our life even today.

Listen to a pastor’s simple but heartfelt prayer that seems to sum it all up,

“Lord, we cannot pull ourselves up by our own boot-straps,
And we cannot change our hearts,

And we cannot give ourselves life.
So, O Holy Spirit, we look to you.
Amen.”

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN