

Mark 1:4-9

4 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."

## JOHN'S BAPTISM

Baptism plays an important role in the life of the church. I am a minister of the Word and Sacrament, and one of the two sacraments in the Presbyterian Church is of course baptism.

But, why is baptism important? What does it mean?

Baptism for John the Baptist was all about repentance. John, according to our Scripture for today proclaimed "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

This baptism was modeled after baptism as it was practiced in the Jewish faith.

Whenever a person wanted to convert to the Jewish faith, baptism was required. And that baptism was literally a ritual bath.

The idea was to scrub off the influences of a pagan, polytheistic culture before putting on the righteousness ways of the one true God.

Baptism in this sense was a kind of rebirth.

But, baptism was just for Gentiles. The Jews were already God's chosen people. They didn't have to go through this ritual.

## A BAPTISM FOR EVERYONE

The big change with John the Baptist is that baptism becomes a sacrament for everyone. Notice that according to the Gospel of Mark John baptizes "all the people of Jerusalem" and "the whole Judean countryside."

If you thought those Billy Graham crusades were big, this crusade was way bigger. Why would all the people of Jerusalem and the whole countryside come out to see John the Baptist, this guy who dressed in a camel hair coat while munching on wild locusts and honey?

Most of you know the standard answer. John looked like the prophet Elijah. He looked like the one who would herald the coming of the Messiah.

We talked about that in Advent.

John the Baptist and his message of repentance point the way to the Messiah who comes.

### THE BAPTISM OF A PROPHET

But, why did the people respond to John in such a positive way? There had been others who had preached the same message and had proved to be false prophets.

In fact there were some who cynically thought that the days of the prophets were long gone. Why didn't they treat John the same way we treat the kook on the side of the road with the placard proclaiming that the end is near?

Jesus would later ask that same question.

Why did you guys go out into the desert to be baptized by John the Baptist? What was it about John that made you pay attention?

Did he dress like a king? Was he a high roller who had a lot of money?

No, said Jesus, You came because John really was a prophet. God laid his hand on John and made him the one who would prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. (See Luke 7:24-30)

Baptism is not about what we do or achieve. Baptism is about what God does for us.

God interrupts our life with something new. God changes those things in our life that we thought were beyond hope and help.

God sends a John the Baptist into our life to confront us and turn us in a new direction.

### REJECTING GOD'S PROPHET

Those who felt most helpless and hopeless, the sinners and the tax collectors, were the first in line to be baptized by John. And the only ones who refused John's baptism were the religious leaders, the ones who thought they were in pretty good shape spiritually.

Ironically the one thing that keeps us from hearing God's message and submitting to the baptism of repentance is the mistaken impression that we're not so bad.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day majored in minors. They, as Jesus once put it, "strain out a gnat but swallow a camel." And the reason their faith was so distorted was they did not see their own need for repentance.

I'm afraid this describes many Christian leaders in our world today.

We are so busy judging others that we are blind to our own need for repentance. We preach a distorted version of the gospel in which the word grace is used but our actions and our theology are not very gracious.

John was empowered by God to preach this message, and John took the message very seriously. But, all of the gospels portray John as one who did not take his own role too seriously. John knew full well that he was just the messenger.

Even as the people from all over the land sought John's baptism in the wilderness, the one doing the baptizing did not claim glory.

On the contrary he pointed beyond himself toward the One who was to come.

John said that he was not worthy to even untie the sandal of the One who was coming.

### BAPTISM OF THE SPIRIT

John said that his baptism was a baptism of water. The One who was coming would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

You see baptism is about more than just repentance. Leaving the old way of life is just the first step.

Baptism is about a new creation. The old passes away and the new begins.

Some people don't understand this, and so they literally repeat the sacrament of baptism over and over again. Baptism becomes a kind of work, an achievement brought about by trying to get right with God, to get clean and come clean.

Trust me. It doesn't work that way.

If we try to gain salvation on our own, we are like Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth trying to wash out that "dammed spot" of blood that cannot be removed by our own efforts.

We need more than Tide and extra effort to remove the stain of sin in our lives. Baptism represents more than just extra effort and elbow grease. We need to be re-formed or reborn by the power of God. That's what baptism is all about.

Baptism is symbolized by water, but as John put it the real power comes from upon high. The real power comes from the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

So, what does that mean to be baptized by the Holy Spirit?

## CREATION

When the people of Jesus' day thought about the Holy Spirit, they thought about the story of creation. That's why one of the lectionary lessons for today comes from Genesis 1:1-5. The world was created by the power of God's Word. God said let it be and it was. And the Bible says that the Spirit of God hovered over those waters of creation.

Thanks to modern physics we know more about creation than any other generation. But, knowing more has not lessened the mystery of creation. If anything it has deepened it.

The universe continues to expand and yet we must ask, "What does it expand from? Who or what was there in the beginning?"

I heard a theoretical astrophysicist speaking about this. She said that as we try to understand that point, that singularity from which everything comes, all the laws of physics quit working. There is no such thing as time or space as we know it.

Science can describe creation, as we now know it. And that is very helpful. But, science cannot answer, "Where does creation come from?" This is a question that is beyond the scope of science. The closer they go to the beginning the more mysterious the process becomes.

On the other hand, as people of faith we do have an answer to that question. It is not an answer that we came up with on our own. It is an answer that God revealed to His people through His Holy Word.

God was there at the beginning. The Spirit of the living God was there at the baptism of creation. And the heavens continue to tell the glory of God. The marvels of the universe and the world in which we live tell the story of God's creative power.

This in and of itself is an awesome and wondrous thing.

## THE PURPOSE OF CREATION

But, what do we believe about this Creator God? Did God just create the universe and let it continue to expand on its own? Or is there some purpose to creation?

In the baptism of Jesus we see that there is indeed purpose. And that purpose is grace and peace as revealed in His Son, Jesus. The Spirit of the Creator comes to earth. The separation between heaven and earth is transcended by the power of God.

God loves us too much to leave us alone. Therefore God sent us his Son.

You can see this message graphically displayed in the baptism of Jesus as portrayed in Mark. This is the great Epiphany of the Gospel of Mark. God was in Christ.

Jesus comes to John for baptism. John baptizes Jesus.

And as Jesus comes up out of the water, the heavens are ripped apart, the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus like a dove, and a voice from heaven proclaims, “You are my Beloved. With you I am well pleased.”

The Spirit of the living God is with Jesus, and wherever Jesus goes, God goes.

Jesus can baptize with the Holy Spirit because Jesus is the bearer of the Spirit. And we believe that the Spirit of the living God (as the hymn puts it) falls fresh on us each and every day. We too are God’s children empowered by the Spirit of God in Christ.

#### THE IMPLICATIONS OF BAPTISM

So, what are the implications of this baptism by the Spirit? Does this mean that God protects us from all harm?

If the life of Christ is our model that certainly can’t be true. From the very beginning of the gospel story we know that there is a cross in his future. And all of us know that we can’t, at least in the long run, protect the ones we love and ourselves from harm.

Baptism in the Spirit is not a guarantee of protection from “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” Baptism in the Spirit is a revelation about identity. Baptism tells us that God is with us and for us.

In his baptism Jesus saw the heavens ripped open. He learned that God was with him and for him. Jesus learned that the Spirit of the living God was upon him. Jesus learned that he was God’s Son.

The ministry of Jesus began with this revelation. In fact you might say that this is another way to talk about the incarnation, how God was in Christ.

How would you change if you had a revelation like this?

How would you change if you saw the heavens ripped open and the Spirit of God descending upon you like a dove?

How would you change if you heard a voice from heaven proclaim, “This is my beloved Son or Daughter?”

This is the message of baptism, not only for Jesus but also for us. Baptism is a revelation about identity. We are a part of God's story. The Spirit of God resides with us and on us.

Now don't misunderstand.

We are not the source of the Spirit. None of us can claim to be the Messiah. Like John the Baptist we point beyond our own little lives to the one who comes.

And yet, the Messiah has revealed to us that God is indeed with us and for us in all the seasons of our life.

In that regard the message of Jesus' baptism and our baptism is the same. And this is the message that we are called to teach our children

#### BAPTISM IN A TIME OF UNCERTAINTY

A theologian wrote these words to his child in the uncertain days after September 11, 2001:

"My child, the world is always a dangerous and threatening place where death surrounds us. [But] when I brought you for baptism I acknowledged that I could not possibly guarantee your [earthly] future. I handed you over to the God who loves you and with whom you are safe in both life and death.

There is no security to be found elsewhere, certainly not from me or those like me. Live with courage, therefore, and, if it must be, do not be afraid to die in the service of what is good and just." (Gilbert Meilaender wrote this piece two weeks after September 11, 2001.)

The funeral service in our Book of Common Worship makes this connection between baptism and eternal life very plain. When the pall is placed over the coffin the minister, using the words of the Apostle Paul says,

"When we baptized in Christ Jesus, we were baptized into his death.

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live a new life.

For if we have been united with Christ in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." (Romans 6:3-5)

To put it another way, from birth to death our life is lived under the promise of baptism. We belong to God.

## STUFF HAPPENS

Pastor Hedi Armstrong wrote about the cynical philosophy of our world. It was summarized for her in a sanitized version of a popular but profane bumper sticker.

(Let me be very careful how I say this now!) It read, “Stuff happens.”

This is indeed a succinct reflection of the seemingly random and absurd nature of life. Stuff happens.

But, the more important question is what do we do when stuff happens? Where do we go for comfort and solace? Hedi suggests that we turn to Jesus.

She wrote that Jesus is “a person to encounter, a relationship to experience. Our hope is not simply in circumstances changing, or things improving, or that certain stuff won’t ever happen, but that our lives are guided by him, our future is in his care.”

Hedi concludes by saying that yes stuff happens and God’s people are not exempt from that stuff. But, we believe that the stuff does not have the final word.

We also believe that grace happens. We believe that into this world of woe God sends a Savior, and His name is Jesus.

That’s what baptism is all about. That’s what baptism means.

Grace happens.

Right in the middle a world filled with injustice and sorrow God intervenes. The heavens are ripped open and for a moment we get a glimpse of God’s future.

His name is Jesus, and in his life, death and resurrection we see a portrait of the grace and truth of Almighty God.

## A CHILD OF THE KING

In his autobiographical book, *Creative Dislocation*, Robert McAfee Brown remembered the day in 1960 when he participated in a Lutheran worship service in East Berlin only a short time before the Berlin wall was constructed.

There were not many people present that day. Church attendance was viewed with suspicion by the state.

In fact the East German Republic had developed secular alternatives to replace all the rituals of the church. But, despite this, a young couple was there in the service, presenting their child for baptism.

Brown was quite frankly amazed.

Why, he wondered, would this couple jeopardize their future and that of their child by insisting on this ancient ritual of baptism? A secular alternative was readily and painlessly available.

Brown wrote:

“The couple did not have to answer my question. Their very act of bringing their baby to the church is a public statement of their priorities. They engage in significant risk because of their faith. In the face of their quiet, public courage I feel unworthy.”

This couple believed that their child was also a child of the king. Their child was God’s child first. And as Paul put, nothing in all creation “neither death, nor life, nor things present or things to come” can change that story.

Whenever Martin Luther found himself ready to give up, whenever worry for his own life and the life of the Church he loved overwhelmed him, it is said that he would touch his forehead and say to himself: "Remember Martin, you have been baptized."

I would suggest that this is a very good reminder. Baptism reminds us that we were born in a state of grace, and grace will lead us home.

We all have those days when everyone is “losing their heads and blaming it on us.” (I must admit that I’ve had more than my share recently!)

All those accusations have a way of taking a toll on us. The world is telling us, “You’re a nobody.” And sometimes we live down to their expectations

In a world that often seeks to put us down we are called to remember the baptism of our Lord. Instead of judging sinners he identified with them in his baptism. In fact he took sin upon himself.

Instead of putting people down he lifted them up. The heavens were opened and the Spirit of God descended upon our world.

We do not believe what the world tells us, that we are nobody special.

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

Remember your baptism. Remember that you are somebody because God says that you are somebody. His Spirit resides with you both now and forever.

Amen.