

Mark 1:4-11

“The River of Life”

You have heard me speak often about the wonderful trip to the Holy Land that my husband and I were privileged to make in 2009. To know that I was walking in the possible footsteps of Rahab, Isaiah, Peter and Jesus along with many other heroes of the faith, is an experience I will always treasure. But in many ways, it also gave me a new Bible. Of course I had read it often, but seeing the places where those Bible stories of my youth, Seminary days and ministry had actually taken place just made it all come alive to me.

Each evening in our hotel room, I took out my Bible to reread what I had seen that day on our journey and then wrote the date beside it in the margins. So when I opened my Bible to Mark's gospel to prepare for today's sermon and saw the date May 12, 2009 written there, the scene flooded back to my mind's eye.

We had travelled into Jordan and were approaching the river from the Jordan side, although many visit from the Israeli side. This was just how our trip was planned. It was extremely hot and I was tired. So frankly I was a little disappointed when we got to what looked more like a wide, muddy creek than a river. The waters in the Holy Land are receding so rapidly that many of us wondered aloud if the next war there will be over water rights.

But we settled in and had a service to renew our Baptism and it turned out to be one of the most meaningful days there. So I can easily picture what happened in our lesson this morning.

The people that Mark wrote about were in need of a prophet. It had been over 400 years since the prophet Malachi had promised that the Day of the Lord was coming and since then, not a sound had been uttered. Four hundred years! Can you imagine the feelings of abandon and despair the Israelites were experiencing? The Old Testament promises that God would be with them must have seemed like a fable at best as they wondered why God had not opened up the heavens with a word for them.

But finally God broke His silence and sent a man named John. An odd man with wild hair and a scraggly beard, dressed in camel's hair, honey dripping from his mouth. I would imagine that he looked like someone that we might see at a busy intersection, holding up a sign that reads: Will work for food.

Not only did he LOOK weird, but his words were so unexpected. They must have made no sense at all. John was preaching about baptism. Now his words sound like a perfect sermon topic to us, but in those days Jews did not need to be baptized. Proselytes who had come to their senses and embraced the Jewish religion were baptized. After all, it was natural for sin-stained, polluted pagans and Gentiles to be baptized. But no Jew ever conceived that he, a member of the chosen people, a son of Abraham, needed cleansing.

Yet, according to the Scriptures, people were lining up on the banks of the Jordan to see and hear this prophet. Not only were they coming, they were listening and following. I can get a mental picture of John, wild eyed, waving his hands like a street preacher and people jumping into the river, on fire by his words. I can picture the river so full of people that it was wall to wall humans and very little water. It had become the river of life.

And who do we see entering this picture but Jesus of Nazareth – the Word made flesh. What would make Jesus come to the river that day? Did Jesus feel that HE needed to repent? Had he spoken sharply with his mother Mary that morning or failed to perform a Jewish ritual that had left him feeling separated from God? That couldn't be it because we know that the Bible tells us that, although Jesus was tempted by Satan, he did not sin as we do.

Perhaps, Jesus knew that it was time to begin his public ministry. Can you picture Jesus in the carpenter's shop with Joseph, head bowed over a piece of wood as he planed it smoothly for a project. And in that moment of quiet comradery with his earthly father, he heard his heavenly Father say, "Now is the time, my son." And so he hung his carpenter's apron on a nail and closed the door on his simple life, to begin his life as the Messiah.

Perhaps Jesus knew it was time for him to become the link from the troubled past of the Chosen People to the unprecedented future kingdom of grace. Having just celebrated Advent and Christmas, we know that God came into the wilderness of our own broken, sinful lives in the manger at Bethlehem. And in doing so, God promises us new life that erupts with the anticipation of something better, fuller, more meaningful. Jesus participating in John's ministry was affirming that God's promise was now fulfilled.

But I believe that Jesus came to the river because he wanted to identify with those people that he came to save. He wanted to emphasize his solidarity with the human race. He wanted to step into the river of life, to wallow in all that sin, if you will. Yet, this is exactly the opposite way that WE behave when we are confronted with sinners. It seem *that* is when our vocabulary starts becoming filled with the words "we" and "they".

Former President Jimmy Carter's notorious brother Billy once said, "Everyone thinks that the worst sin in the world is the ONE he hasn't committed." And isn't that how we all make ourselves feel so righteous? We spend a lot of time in the church talking about God's love of sinners, but we sure do go to a lot of trouble not to be mistaken for one of them.

Friends, Jesus Christ did not come to establish the world of "we and they". He came to make us one. And while we are blessed in this particular church to be so united as one body, our culture has been divided more distinctly into "we and they" in the last year than I can remember for a long time. Jesus' baptism is a reminder to us all that, as Christians, we are to stand united as one body against the culture of division that plagues our world. So Jesus' baptism was meant to be a unifying act.

But above all, we know that Jesus stepped into the river as an act of grace. I would like to think that it was the human side of Jesus that wanted to jump into the river of life because his desire to be a part of our lives was so great. But in reality only the Divine side of Jesus could have made such a sacrifice. God could think of no other way to save his people than to become one of us and pay the price for the sins that he never committed and so, THAT is what he did. So in the moment of Jesus' baptism, the waters became the river of grace.

And to flesh out this grace even further, the Bible presents a God who is the absolute of perfection, who is a God of love, and yet who is simultaneously a God of wrath. A. T. Pierson compares it to an arch. You have the love of God supporting one side and the wrath of God supporting the other side, and without either of them the entire thing would fall down. So while the wrath of God must have been so disgusted with the

way His people had turned away from him, the LOVE of God stepped into the river of life to bring his people home.

I believe that there is one other reason that Jesus stepped into that river and humbled himself by having his cousin baptize him that day. I believe that this was the first recorded act of Jesus' obedience to God. God led Jesus to take that first step of repentance, even if only symbolically. Surely Jesus knew from that moment on that his journey of obedience would lead to the cross.

And God rewarded Jesus for his obedience by issuing forth spoken praise. "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." God quoted himself by uttering the words of Psalm 2, which every good Jew considered to be a description of the Messiah. God called him his beloved. Surely Jesus understood in that moment that had had been chosen for the Cross.

Yet just as God does not leave us alone in our trials, he did not abandon Jesus that day either. God sent the sign of the Spirit in the dove to remind Jesus that God would be with him every step of the way. Just the way God is with us, too.

And while Jesus could have claimed the Spirit for his own personal gain and used that Holy Power to glorify himself, he did not. Jesus chose instead to invite the Spirit to fill him with the ability to share God's grace through his healing ministry and teaching wisdom and compassionate living in order to bring about a kingdom where all are one, as we were intended to be.

You may be wondering why it is important to spend a whole worship service reflecting on this one act of Jesus, which seems like such a logical step to us as modern day Christians. After all, some of us cannot even recall our *own* baptism. Perhaps we

were infants who cried through the prayer and embarrassed our mothers. Some of us were older and can recall the feeling that we had that compelled us to walk down the aisle and be submerged in the pool.

However, as we begin a new year in the life of the church together, we can ALL remember the baptism of Jesus. We can remember his willingness to be one of us, to experience our feelings of rejection, failure, confusion and pain. We can strive toward the obedience that he showed us when he chose a life of suffering and death so that WE could have an eternal life of endless joy.

And in the end, we are reminded that Jesus' act of obedience leads US to the cross too. Because we believe that those who are baptized into Christ's life are also baptized into his death. That is why you will hear me say *at some time* during every funeral or memorial service that we share here, that in his or her death, the baptism of our brother or sister is now complete.

This is not to say that our baptism offers us salvation. We know that salvation come to us as a free gift of God's grace. But remembering Jesus baptism reminds us that our own baptism initiates a lifelong process of transformation, both in the community of faith and in the individuals who belong to it. In that process we die to all that is evil in both our common life and our personal lives—as we are raised together to new life in Christ. And Eternal life is the culmination of this wonderful journey.

So as we remember the story of Jesus refusing to be talked out of baptism by his cousin and stepping into the river of life, we remember his first act of grace. Let us all be challenged to recall that day often. Because when we remember the Baptism of our Lord,

we are reminded that we are children created in God's image and destined for eternal glory. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

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