

Mark 1:4-11

“I Am a Child of God”

It is hard for most of us, only two weeks after Christmas, to make the emotional jump from the baby in manger to a thirty-something year old man. But not for Mark when he writes his Gospel. In Mark there is no journey on the back of a donkey, no inn with a “No Vacancy” sign posted out front. There are no angels, shepherds or wisemen. No star to follow.

According to Mark, Jesus appears for the very first time as a fully grown man on the banks of the Jordan River responding to cry from John the Baptizer’s to repent and prepare for the Kingdom of God. Not only have we skipped any understanding of how Jesus got here but he has apparently already left the family business and is ready to work in a new field. Which makes Mark twice as hard to swallow. After all – what happened in the first 30 years of Jesus’ life AND why in the world would the “Son of God” need to be baptized at all? Why would Jesus need to repent?

This is an interesting question and one that preachers have tried to work out for many years and with many answers. I myself have preached from this pulpit asking the same question. But today, let’s look at the particulars of Mark.

There are very few things that are recorded in all four Gospels and invariably, even those things are not told in the same way. Jesus’ baptism IS recorded by all four evangelists, which gives credence to its authenticity. Jesus responds to John’s cry, steps into the line with a world full of sinners and gets dunked in the river of life with every other Tom, Dick and Mary. After this, the Heaven’s open, a dove appears and a voice cries out, “This is my son, the Beloved; with whom I am well pleased.” Of course all four the writers have four different slants.

Matthew has Jesus coming up and the voice says to EVERYONE, “THIS is my beloved.” Matthew was written for the purpose of convincing the Jews that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. So naturally, the message needs to be for everyone. Luke tells us that Jesus is praying when the Spirit descends. This is because the importance of prayer is a major theme in Luke. And John only reports the voice, spirit and dove being witnessed by the baptizer himself. His emphasis, as the writer of the spiritual journey of Jesus, is more on the Holy Spirit than Jesus himself in this story.

But here in Mark’s gospel we read: “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. And a voice came from heaven, “YOU are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well please’.” Did you catch it? In Mark, only Jesus sees the heavens rip open, hears the voice and is surrounded by the Spirit. This is because Mark’s narrative is one of mystery, secrecy, requiring discernment. Only Spirits, good and bad, recognize Mark’s Jesus and people have a way to go before they figure it all out. Therefore, who he is when he is baptized is still a mystery to those who are in the muddy waters of the Jordan *with* the savior that day.

But it is my understanding that my job as the preacher is to help us all discern what in the world this means to ordinary folk like you and me. Well, the truth is that, in Mark’s Gospel, whenever the phrase “Son of God” is used, it is in relationship to Jesus’ obedience. Because a major theme in Mark is to present Jesus as the Suffering Servant. And usually, his obedience leads to suffering. So, let’s examine what this means for us today.

The Apostle Paul tells us that Jesus stepped into the river of life so that we might claim communion with him in his baptism. This sounds so beautiful, so awe-filled, even mysterious. It implies new life, new birth and cleansing. And all of this is true. But from Mark’s standpoint,

“if our baptism involves a participation in Jesus’ baptism, and if Jesus’ baptism initiates his ministry of suffering and obedience, then OUR baptism must include a similar acceptance of self-denial.” (1) In other words, we are to pick up our crosses and carry them. Now that sounds a little more like work. And in my experience, obedience is usually hard work.

For those of us who believe in God’s sanctifying grace, we know that when Jesus received the Holy Spirit that day, he also received the ability to impute that Spirit on us. To give the Spirit away – to share it with us. He did not receive the spirit in order to savor it privately, but to pass it on. Doing so is part of his obedience to God’s plan.

Yet, in *our* tradition, we usually baptize babies, who have no knowledge of or ability to carry out obedience. It is something they learn from the actions and words of their parents and those fellow disciples in a particular church who vow to help teach the child the ways of God. In other words, baptism is the beginning of a journey.

Truthfully, one does not become a Christian at the moment of our baptism any more than a young man or woman becomes a soldier the minute they enlist in the army. It takes months of training before their instructor might say, “I think we have made a soldier out of him.” So it is for us as disciples in our walk with God.

Yet Jesus decided to begin his lifetime work of obedience to God for our salvation, at the same point that some of us do. At our baptism. By either recognizing or having someone claim for us the need to be publicly recognized as a member of the household of God. And just as the Spirit told Jesus, “You are the Son of God”, our baptism is a reminder that I am a child of God and so are you.

As an aside, I have seen the Jordan River and it is one of the muddiest rivers I have ever seen. Actually, it is more like a wide creek now. But our guide, Jacob, told us that it has

ALWAYS been that muddy – just wider in Jesus’ day. So again, why is Jesus willing to get into this muddy water with other people who have let God down?

Well, these people have come, like you and I, knowing that our sins are many. That our world is broken and that, even though we often feel the need to change, it is sometimes easier to just go with the flow, to use a bad pun. However, Jesus wants us to know that he is willing to let the “word made flesh” be drug through the mud, just like we are so that he can be fully immersed in our humanity.

It reminds me of the story about a Sunday School class concerning moral behavior. “Tell me,” asked the teacher, “what must we do before we can expect forgiveness for our sins?” After some silence, one boy raised his hand. “Well first,” the boy said, “we gotta’ go sin.” And that is all too easy.

Even though Jesus Christ was without sin, he wanted to begin at the same point that we must. In response to the call to repent. Yet, the hard part is the repentance that must follow. This is where we pick up our crosses. **Because** Jesus responds to a baptism of repentance, you and I are called to do the same. We cannot simply stay where we are – wallowing in the mud. We must take that new name that WE have received, “Child of God” and respond to God’s grace in a way that shows other people what repentance looks like.

Repentance means 'to change' or 'to turn.' Once a person hears the gospel and is convicted that his way of life is wrong, he must change his present behavior. This means that repentance is not just feeling sorry, remorseful, or conscience-stricken, but being so troubled in one's heart that one begins to live according to God's standards—according to God's law. Feeling sorry without changing one's life is not repentance! To take up our crosses means that the fruits of repentance will be visible.

But perhaps a more positive way to look at this in light of Jesus willingness to repent is that when we turn FROM sin, we are turning TOWARDS God. That might sound more possible. Most of us no longer have any illusions that we live in a “Christian culture.” But if we turn toward God in our repentance, at least we know that we are heading in the right direction and leading others, by our words and actions, to do the same.

Another part of taking up our cross or living into the Baptism of Christ is to be forgiving. This means to forgive others and to forgive ourselves. In everyday life, this can be extremely difficult. But during the last week, the need for forgiveness was lived out in a public way that few can ignore.

No matter what side of the political aisle you sit on, the events of this past Wednesday were disturbing. What should have been a simple, “rubber stamp” process became a worldwide debacle leading to fear, violence and shame. And of course, we have anger thrown into the mix.

As children who are baptized into Christ’s life and therefore, bearing the claim, “I am a Child of God,” our task is to respond to these events with forgiveness. Our human nature is to defend our position or to point fingers at those who believe differently. But as people claimed by God, forgiven and freed by the blood of Jesus Christ, we are called to be forgiving. In fact, forgiveness on ALL sides is the only way our nation will be able to move forward.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birthday is this week and will be celebrated by the nation on the 18th, was a person who had much to say about forgiveness. His words can help us all get back on track. First he said, “We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love.” He also said, “Forgiveness does not mean ignoring what has been done or putting a false label on an evil act.”

It means, rather, that the evil act no longer remains as a barrier to the relationship. ... The degree to which we are able to forgive determines the degree to which we are able to love our enemies.”

Of course, these wise words apply to any situation in life. Love is the only thing that will unify us. Loving even people who are different than we are and who live out their beliefs in a different way. In order to do this, we must look for the things that we can all agree on. Perhaps agreeing that we all care about America and want what is best for every man, woman and child is the best place to start. This would be a wonderful way for each person listening to lay claim to our baptism of grace and pick up our crosses.

And here is the Good News for us all! When we are claimed in the waters of baptism and begin to live into Jesus’ baptism, and therefor to live into the muddy waters of discipleship and cross bearing, we are also baptized into Jesus’ glorious and eternal life. And that is why living into our identity as a “Child of God” is so important. Because through our repentance and our acts of forgiveness, we show others what the Good News of the Gospel really is!

Minister Fred Craddock, a master storyteller, once told the following story: A seminary professor was vacationing with his wife in Gatlinburg, TN. One morning, they were eating breakfast at little restaurant. A man came to their table, asked to sit down and began speaking.

“See that mountain over there”, pointing out the restaurant window. “Not far from the base of that mountain, there was a boy born to an unwed mother. He had a hard time growing up, because every place he went, he was always asked the same question, ‘Hey boy, Who’s your daddy?’ Whether he was at school, in the grocery store or drug store, people would ask the same question, ‘Who’s your daddy?’” He would hide at recess and lunch time from other students. He would avoid going in to stores because that question hurt him so bad.

“When he was about 12 years old, a new preacher came to his church. He would always go in late and slip out early to avoid hearing the question, ‘Who’s your daddy?’. But one day, the new preacher said the benediction so fast he got caught and had to walk out with the crowd. Just about the time he got to the back door, the new preacher, not knowing anything about him, put his hand on his shoulder and asked him, ‘Son, who’s your daddy?’”

The whole church got deathly quiet. He could feel every eye in the church looking at him. Now everyone would finally know the answer to the question, ‘Who’s your daddy’. This new preacher, though, sensed the situation around him and using discernment that only the Holy Spirit could give, said the following to that boy: “‘Wait a minute! I know who you are. I see the family resemblance now. You are a child of God.’” And he patted the boy on his shoulder and said, ‘Boy, you’ve got a great inheritance. Go and claim it.’ With that, the boy smiled for the first time in a long time and walked out the door a changed person.

Whenever anybody asked, ‘Who’s your Daddy?’ he’d tell them, ‘I’m a Child of God’.” The distinguished gentleman got up from the table and said, “Isn’t that a great story?” The professor responded that it really was a great story! As the man turned to leave, he said, “You know, if that new preacher hadn’t told me that I was one of God’s children, I probably never would have amounted to anything!” And he walked away.

The seminary professor and his wife were stunned. He called the waitress over and asked her, “Do you know who that man was who just left that was sitting at our table?” The waitress grinned and said, “Of course. Everybody here knows him. That’s Ben Hooper. He’s the former governor of Tennessee!”

Oh, what a difference we can make in this world when we, like Jesus, accept our name as a child of God and then live into that gift with our words and our actions. So today, as we

remember the baptism of Jesus, may we each realize that by his life, baptism, death and resurrection we are all given the name “Beloved Child of God.” And may we become more like Jesus Christ because he has shown the way. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf
Nazareth Presbyterian Church, Jan 10, 2021

(1) Lee Barrett, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1, Westminster/John Knox Press, 2008, pg. 240.

PRAYER FOR THE NATION

God of justice, love and hope, in these days of strife and discord, we pray for our country. Call us to our better selves, that we may release all anger rooted in self-centeredness. Help us to come together as a nation and realize that any political and ideological differences are negligible and can be overcome. Lead us as only you can to live in acceptance of each other's differences and united by our common allegiance to you and to nation. Help us to go forward with a new determination to learn from our mistakes, to overcome our divisions and advance to being a better nation.

Please use the United States as an example of a country that is determined to become more compassionate, just and democratic. A nation where justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. A nation determined to promote peaceful engagement for all people. Grant us strength and courage to listen wholeheartedly to voices long silenced.

We pray that the Holy Spirit will bring a newfound peace to our land. A surprising peace, yes. But a deeply needed one. Peace to heal wounds. We remember the warnings of Jesus about violence begetting violence: Save us from further acts of political and racial violence. Save us from mistrust, chaos, and injustice. May the coming days be ruled by truth, goodness and integrity. From sea to shining sea, from small town streets to the halls of power, help each and every one of us to walk in the manner of Jesus Christ. We offer this prayer in Jesus' name. Amen.