

sermon-1/11/09 Newport Presbyterian Church  
“Understanding Our Baptisms”  
Mark 1:4-11  
By Jim Patten

Martin Luther had a very high opinion of baptism. He once said we should begin each day remembering our baptism. He said it would set the tone for the whole day. I wonder if that is true. How would we need to understand our baptisms for that to be a meaningful way to start each day?

This Sunday we will try to answer that question. The focus will be on Jesus’ baptism. If we can understand what Mark is trying to say about that baptism we might have a fuller understanding of our own baptisms.

Mark obviously felt Jesus’ baptism was extremely important. Matthew and Luke begin their telling of the Jesus story with stories of the birth of Jesus. This was their way of telling us something about the meaning and identity of Jesus. Mark feels we can best get at that information beginning the story with Jesus’ baptism. That is such a different way to begin the story and very informative.

Some think Mark was trying to tell us that Jesus first had an inkling of his special identity as God’s son at his baptism. Mark, in essence, was saying Jesus was adopted as God’s son at his baptism. There is nothing in Mark about the virgin birth or Jesus’ self-identity earlier in his life. Not all scholars agree with this perspective. Still it is an interesting one to ponder as we think about baptism.

What is certain is the picture Mark is painting here about how Jesus was impacted by his baptism. Jesus apparently had a great spiritual experience when he came up out of the waters of the Jordan. Mark says the voice out of the heavens spoke directly to Jesus in a personal, private way. “You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

In contrast, Matthew says the voice was not a personal one, but an announcement to those who were present. “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Mark wants to emphasize it was more of a personal experience for Jesus that informed his identity. Following this powerful experience Jesus is immediately driven into the wilderness to figure out what kind of Son of God he would be.

In order to fully understand this, let’s set the stage for Jesus’ baptism. Jesus came all the way from Galilee to be baptized by John. John was not an easy person to be around. He was a prophet jabbing at those in power from the margins. It is interesting that Mark felt the need to tell us what he wore and what he ate.

Can you imagine the Pastor Nominating Committee, when they introduced me to you some 4 ½ years, ago saying, “Jim appeared from Western Pennsylvania wearing clothes from L.L. Bean and Eddie Bauer and eating mostly organic food, low in fats?”

Mark must have had a point in talking about John's dress and diet. Scholars tell us this was to remind his readers of Elijah in the Old Testament who wore similar clothing. 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings describes Elijah as "a hairy man with a leather belt around his waist." John was playing the Elijah role. Elijah was supposed to appear and introduce the Messiah.

More than that, Mark was presenting us with a prophet who was challenging the religious power elite of his day centered in the Temple. Those elite said forgiveness was only possible through the rituals performed in the Temple services. They had a monopoly on God. John said that simply is not true. Forgiveness is possible outside the Temple. Religious authorities don't have God in their back pocket.

When Jesus goes to John to be baptized, he is affirming that perspective. It is not so much that Jesus needed to repent and seek forgiveness. It is more that he was affirming John's radical perspective and humbly identifying with the people. That tells us a lot about Jesus.

Now, let's get to how this spiritual experience affected Jesus. The words out of the heavens were quoting two Old Testament passages. Whenever a new king was crowned in Israel, they sang Psalm 2. In that Psalm in verse seven we read, "He (God) said to me, You are my son; today I have begotten you." Kings in Israel were seen as God's son.

Thus Jesus was hearing that he was the true king of the Jews. But he was also hearing more than that. When the voice says, "the Beloved; with you I am well pleased," it was echoing Isaiah 42:1 that reads, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights." This is from one of the suffering servant passages.

Jesus was then hearing a two-fold message about his identity. He was the true king of Israel, only his kingship was to be radically different from other kings. He was to live out his kingship as the suffering servant, serving rather than being served.

This was absolutely a new concept in Israel. Most in Jesus' day could not understand it, not even his closest disciples until after the resurrection. Jesus' baptism was a radical event, a groundbreaking event that redefined what it meant to be a king in the Kingdom of God. It changed Jesus' whole life.

What does that mean for our baptisms? It means, first and foremost, we are defined by our baptisms. When we are baptized we are told we belong to God. From then on, our primary identity is as a child of God. That supercedes all else: accomplishments, status, class, wealth, fame, you name it. We belong to God. That means we are beloved by God.

In a chaotic world, maybe especially in our chaotic world where weather, wars, senseless violence, and economic disasters threaten to drown us, we can take great comfort that what matters most is that we are God's beloved children. Nothing in life or in death can take that away from us. That is the foundation of our identity.

“Chrissy, a frustrated character in the play, *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, says to a friend: ‘All my life I wanted to be somebody. But I see now I should have been more specific.’”

We all want to be somebody. We all want our lives to make a difference. We all want to see meaning in spite of the suffering, in spite of our own stumbles and terrible mistakes. Because of our baptisms we are somebody.

And because we are somebody, what we do matters. Madeleine L’Engle once said, “Everything we do either draws the Kingdom of love closer, or pushes it further off.” When we live out of our baptismal identities, our whole life is about drawing the Kingdom of love closer. That is noble work. It matters. It is important. Remember your baptism and be thankful. Amen