

Epworth Chapel on the Green
January 11, 2015
Baptism of Our Lord
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Isaiah 42:1-8
Psalm 89:20-29
Acts 10:34-38
Mark 1:5-11

Throughout history, the Church has always struggled with the baptism of Jesus, particularly with the question of why the Son of God would come to John and submit to baptism.

After all, John's baptism was, the Scriptures tell us, a "baptism of repentance." It required a change of heart and life that signified that the baptized person was preparing for the last days.

This condition hardly seems to apply to Jesus. Episcopal preacher Barbara Brown Taylor describes the scene at the Jordan River that day:

...the place was teeming with sinners. Faulty, sorry, guilty human beings who hoped against hope that John could clean them up and turn their lives around...Some were notorious sinners, and some were there for crimes of the heart known only to themselves, but none of them had illusions of their own innocence.

...Then Jesus showed up and got in line with them...What was he doing in that crowd of sinners, looking and acting like one of them? What did he have to be sorry about, and why was God's Beloved submitting himself to a scruffy character like John? [Lectionary Homiletics, 14:1, p. 49]

Why indeed.

But we must remember something. To those in the crowd that day coming to John for baptism, Jesus would have been just an ordinary Joe coming to pursue a change of heart and life, just like them. No one, at that point, knew very much about him.

In Jesus' baptism, Mark proclaims a very important message about *who* Jesus is and *what* he has come to do.

First, Jesus is declared to be the Son of God. The heavenly voice that says "you are my beloved Son" hearkens back to Psalm 2 and to other portions of the Old Testament, and the language is the language of the coronation of the King.

The part of the voice which says "with you I am fully pleased" hearkens back to Isaiah 42 (which we read today) and Isaiah 64. These are known as "servant songs," describing the ministry of the coming Messiah in terms of one who is the suffering servant.

Jesus' baptism, then, is an occasion for a divine manifestation, an *epiphany*, which proclaims him to be the Son of God. He is both the sovereign King and the Suffering Servant.

But Mark tells us something else. The people of that day were looking for the Messiah to usher in the "new age," the dramatic coming of God's Kingdom in power. The Old Testament prophets had announced that certain signs would accompany this.

Isaiah and Ezekiel speak of it in terms of the splitting of the heavens (cf. Is. 64 and Ezekiel 1).

Isaiah speaks on three other occasions of this in terms of the descent of the Spirit (cf. Is. 11:2; 42:1; 61:1-4). One such occasion is found in our Old Testament lesson this morning.

Mark is telling us, then, that Jesus' baptism and the beginning of his public life are ushering in the "new age," the special time anticipated in the Old Testament. It is literally an "earth shattering" event.

Just prior to Jesus coming to John, you will recall that John says that there is One who is coming after him who is greater than he is, one who will baptize not with water but with the Holy Spirit.

Well, guess what? Jesus' baptism is the event, the sign, which shows us that the One more powerful than John is here. That's why Mark will say just a few verses from this text, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand."

And there is a third message Mark wants us to see. As the heavens open and the Spirit descends upon Jesus, he is commissioned for ministry. In the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus will now go out and do battle against demons and all evil forces that cripple, alienate and destroy human life. The rest of the Gospel of Mark vividly describes this.

But Jesus' ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit is not an arrogant display of power. For Jesus is the servant of God whose ministry will take him to the Cross.

Mark has a subtle way of reminding us of this. Mark tells us that the heavens were "split open." The word Mark uses here is the same word he will use at the end of the Gospel to describe the tearing of the veil of the Holy of Holies at Jesus' crucifixion.

Jesus' baptism, then, is also a foreshadowing of his own cruel death.

But this text about Jesus' baptism is not merely about the identity of Jesus. It's also about *us*, about who we are as those who have been baptized in his Name.

And there are parallels between what Mark says of Jesus and our own identity as baptized believers.

First, just as Jesus was declared to be the Son of God publicly at his baptism, there is a parallel sense in which we are declared to be God's sons and daughters in baptism. Not in the sense that Jesus was, but in the sense that we are God's children, that God has *claimed* us for his own, that God has *named* us to be His own. Our baptism demonstrates not only that God is *with* us (Immanuel), but that God is *for* us. We are truly God's beloved sons and daughters.

Second, just as Jesus ushered in the "new age" at his baptism, even so our baptism translates us out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of light.

In our baptism we become a people of the “new age,” a people of the Kingdom, whose lives and values are now shaped by God’s agenda and not the world’s.

As those who’ve been baptized in his Name, we become a little outpost of the Kingdom of Heaven right here on earth. We are a new creation, where repentance is both a point of departure and a continuing way of life as we renounce evil and walk in obedience to the Holy Spirit.

Finally, our baptism commissions us for service, even as Jesus’ baptism was an occasion for his commissioning to service. You take your place alongside others who say, “how can we serve, who can we help, what can we do?”

As I said, this text is not only about who Jesus is. It is also about who we are. We all hunger to know -- at a deep level of our being -- that we are loved, that we are accepted. Each of us hungers, in that deep place, to know *who* we are and *whose* we are. In that sense, it is no exaggeration to say that the day you were baptized was one of the most important days of your life.

As you come to the Table of the Lord this morning, I would remind you that you are God’s precious sons and daughters, named by God and claimed for God to be servants and ambassadors. We have been bound together as people of the new age, empowered by the Holy Spirit to love and serve, to live our baptism daily and to show forth Jesus to the world.

So come with faith. Receive the grace he offers you. Acknowledge with gratitude again your status as God's beloved child. Hear Him commission you into His service. Then rise up and join hands with your brothers and sisters, ready to serve Him by serving others.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.