

January 10, 2021

“Ripped Open” Mark 1: 4-10

This Sunday in the church calendar is Baptism of the Lord Sunday! It really signals the beginning of Jesus’ ministry.

Baptisms are a very special and nostalgic event in the church. Especially the baptism of an infant. Everyone dresses up. People who have not been to church for years show up. The young couple with baby in arms is there even though they rarely darkened the church door. The baptism dress has been cleaned, starched, and pressed. This is the 4th generation to use the dress.

All are ready. The Minister and the Elder are posed to ask the questions. And it goes off without a glitch. The baby did not cry and even grinned when paraded down the center aisle of the sanctuary.

Pictures are taken (unfortunately during the service with everyone’s phone cameras!) and everyone goes off to Grandma’s for the baptism luncheon. It is a sweet day.

I almost got into trouble recently when my niece was going to have their 3rd child baptized. I asked my sister, her mother, WHY? They never go to church. They get my sister to take the oldest one. They took certain vows which they never will live up to. It is just a show. It comes across almost as a rite of passage.

It’s hell to have an uncle who is a minister!

I start this way about baptism because it is a far contrast to the biblical story. The baptism of Jesus has a much more radical message in it than is our understanding of baptism. In fact, I am not clear we really understand the import of baptism in the Christian faith. For us it has become a nice, sweet rite

of passage. Something you are SUPPOSED to do. And its significance never seems to come into focus for us.

Look with me at the passage from Mark's Gospel:

The setting is a far cry to ours. John the Baptist is clothed with camel's hair and a leather belt. The baptism luncheon consisted of locusts and wild honey. They are not in any kind of church building. They are just out in the wilderness.

There was a crowd of people...not just family and kinfolks focusing on a child. All kinds of people were there. Rich, poor, sinners, have nots, problem people all gathered around. All declaring themselves to be sinners. All needing repentance and hope that John will baptize them.

And in the middle of this crowd of folks comes Jesus. He is just another person in the crowd. One of many. He is seeking baptism as well. Not a special one...just a member of the crowd.

As an aside I've always wondered why Jesus needed to be baptized. He was without sin. Why did he need to repent? What value was there for him in the baptism? Why was he in the crowd? It could be another whole sermon or a long Sunday School class discussion.

Look at the contrasts here compared to our baptisms. We are proper. We are stately. We are the ones following a particular protocol and tradition. Completely opposite of this setting in Scripture. An entirely different contrast.

So, what about baptism? Why is it significant? What we are missing in our experiences of it?

First of all, remember: Baptism is a gift of God. It comes from God. It is blessed by God. It is a true gift. It is one of the first signs of grace we behold from the Almighty. Nothing we do can earn it nor do we even deserve it.

I've often been very impressed we baptize infants. I often wonder why we do that as they are clueless about what is transpiring except someone is messing with their head and putting some cold water on it! However, it is a clear reminder of how much of a gift baptism is. It is also a bold statement about God. That even before an infant knows anything, God is there. Before an infant is aware of what is happening to them, God is present. It is a wonderful affirmation of the fact that God COMES TO US! God seeks us out. God is always on the prowl for each of us.

Yet, many of us have the mistaken idea that we need to find God. We need to read more scripture to discover God. We need to pray harder to be closer to God. We need to worship more. We need to get our act together and then we can finally know who God is. We will finally see the face of God!

Remember the Prodigal Son? The scoundrel who went and spent his inheritance? Threw away money. Was a less than desirable and honorable and upstanding citizen. Would not win Citizen of the Year Award.

In the passage, the turning point in scripture declares, "He came to his senses." He realized how foolish he had been. He finally woke up to reality. So he went back home willing to be a servant on his father's farm.

As the Prodigal approaches the house, his father sees him coming and darts out the door, down the path, and hugged him. For he was lost, but now is found. He was dead but now is alive. And the father did not stop there. He threw a party the likes of which had not been seen in those parts.

The father ran out to meet the scoundrel...his beloved son. That's what God does. He reaches out to us. He runs towards us. He desires us.

That's a meaning of baptism. An incredible example of God coming to us. Being with us. Accepting us. Desiring us. Jesus being in the crowd sent a powerful message that God is with the down and outs. God rubs shoulders with the lesser lights of society. God works overtime in order to be part of our lives.

It happens all the time. God breaking into our lives. I'm not sure we realize it. We write things off to happenstance or to luck or to karma or to coincidence. But it is not! As Presbyterians, we believe God is a part of all of our life. Even in the smallest way. And that God can take the sadness of our lives and make it blossom into joy!

Stella Billson, a wonderful English lady, lived into her 90's. She made the best scones you ever tasted. She was a church member at the Summit Church when I was pastor. She would tell a word from her grandmother: There is a blessing in everything in life. Sometimes, though you have to dig to see it!

What a great thought. What a great message.

What about that unexpected phone call you got recently that lifted your spirits? God coming to you.

What about that money you unexpectedly received in the past year that came in the nick of time: God coming to you?

What about that conversation you had with a friend that helped you clarify some things with your life? God's words to you?

What about the touch you experienced in a prayer time? God speaking to you?

What about your decision not to make a decision which worked out best? God delaying you?

One of the truths about baptism is God coming to us. God's grace abounds. God's love is demonstrated through

this sacrament. God takes the initiative and action in our lives. All wrapped up in the meaning of baptism.

The other part of this story that I had not seen before is in verse 10. Oh, I had read that verse for years but did not appreciate its significance:

And just as he (Jesus) was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens TORN APART and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.”

I have read that passage and was pretty clear the heavens opened up for the dove to get out. And I have read it wrong! The word is not OPEN. The Greek word is “TO TEAR APART,” not open.

When you open a door, you can close it. When you open a book, you can close it.

Yet when you tear apart a piece of paper, it does not go back together without revealing the tear. When you tear apart a piece of cloth you cannot close it back up.

The heavens were “TORN APART”! There was a breach in the heavens that could not be closed up. There was a tear in the heavenly places that would never be the same. And the voice of God spoke, “My beloved with whom I am well pleased!”

It is an incredible statement by God: I am no longer removed from my creation. I am no longer sitting far off. I am no longer absent from those whom I created and loved.

In this baptism of Jesus, God declared once and for all that God would be with us. God would live among us. God would be our partner in the experience we call life.

It is a declaration by God that life will be different. I, God declares, will be in the middle of your lives and we will make a difference in this world, my creation. No longer shall you be alone. You will not walk by yourselves.

It puts baptism in a whole new perspective. Being baptized means we are partnered with God in the life of faith as a Christian. It means we will be open to the working of the Spirit. It means God has claimed us and we are no longer our own. It is a new way to live life...dealing with all aspects of life but not doing it alone. God is with us. God is Emmanuel. Baptism is our entry into this new life and through it, God equips us and enables us.

Because the baptism of Jesus is the beginning of his ministry, it seems to me that baptism is the beginning of our faith walk - - even as a 4 or an 8-month old infant. That we are claimed by God and we have committed ourselves to a life under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Which may mean we will be called to be and do things we never thought we could. Which means my life is no longer my own. Which means I am a child of God, not just a child of some parents.

If I had my way, I would move the baptism font in every church to the front door of the church...that is right inside the door when you enter the sanctuary. As a visible reminder that our life of faith begins with baptism and that our baptism is complete when we go home to be with the Lord.