

Sermon: At Jesus' Baptism
Scripture: Mark 1:4-12
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
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We have this morning the scripture that begins our entire Bible and a scripture that begins the Gospel of Mark, which most scholars believe was the first Gospel to be written. We are granted this morning these words about beginning –

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” and “the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

And in both stories of beginning we have water.

“Darkness was over the face of the deep” and “John was baptizing in the River Jordan” and when Jesus came up out of the water.

And in both scriptures the Spirit of God descends upon the water God speaks.

Genesis says “and the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters and God spoke saying ‘let there be light’ and there was light.” And the Gospel of Mark says “When he came up out of the water the Spirit descended on him like a dove and a voice came from heaven saying ‘you are my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.’”

Since Genesis was the sacred scripture that Mark, the Gospel writer, and all his people would have known like the back of their hands, this parallel is most likely not happenstance. Mark is most likely suggesting that what is happening here with Jesus is equivalent to, on the same order of, what happened at the very beginning of time. That what God is doing here through John in the River Jordan and with Jesus is related to the creative act that God was doing at the very beginning. God’s creative action was not done once and for all back then at the beginning of all things but God’s creativity, the unfolding of creation, continues and this baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan is a moment of deep creativity and profound meaning for creation.

On the human scale, this baptism is like the anointing of a new king or, we might say, the inauguration of a new president, an act that promises change, that claims something new is happening that has never happened before and as a result there is cause for hope in the future, despite all the signs to the contrary.

President-elect Obama really did get the message right, and we could even say biblically correct, by placing all the focus and emphasis in his campaign upon change.

Some said that while his message was all about change what exactly he was going to change was less certain and only time will tell whether we can count on him to deliver the change that we as a country were voting for. But the message he delivered was about change in the present and hope for the future and I guess there were just enough of us in this country who looked around at how things are right now and said to ourselves – this is not ok, we need a change. If enough of us had looked at where we are right now and said – actually, this is pretty darn good, who wants change! – then there would have been a different outcome.

It's something similar to this that John the Baptist was preaching out in the wilderness and why people were coming to him. They were looking around them in Jerusalem, the religious and spiritual center of the world where stood the mightiest temple of the faith and the holy religious leaders who served within it and they were leaving to look for something else. They were going out away from Jerusalem and into the wilderness where this crazy dirty, wild-eyed man was yelling about repentance and change and forgiveness of sin. They were going out to the margins, to the neglected and condemned places, far from their religious establishment and to this man who was dunking people in the river and shooting his mouth off about another One who was coming even greater and wilder and more powerful than he, in fact one before whom he wasn't even worthy enough to stoop down and untie his sandal. And people were flocking to this crazy man to hear his message of change, of what might be coming in the future because it gave them if nothing else some sense of hope.

For you see in the first century CE in Palestine Rome had a strangle hold on the Jewish people who lived there. Rome was occupying Palestine, calling it their own, and the official Jewish leadership during that time was capitulating to the powers of Rome such that the great mass of people were disgusted with their leaders and were looking elsewhere for leadership and hope. And in case the parallels aren't clear enough with what's happening today, the only leaders that were giving the common Jewish people any sense of hope at all in the midst of the oppressive situation were the Zealots, the Jewish version, we might say, of Hamas, those who believed that the only hope in the face of the occupation was violent resistance, to drive Rome into the sea.

And you can bet that when people heard of this crazy man out in the desert who was proclaiming the coming of the Messiah, many of them went out to him with the hope and expectation that he was right – the Messiah was coming – but ALSO that the coming of the Messiah meant that a power greater than the Roman Empire was dawning and finally the words of the prophets would be fulfilled, Rome would get what they had coming to them and the Jews would finally be granted the power and position that they believed God had always promised to them in their homeland.

But the first surprise they got once they finally made it out there to John in the wilderness was that this was not a man sympathetic to the Jewish Zealots and decrying the injustices of the Romans and promising the coming of the Messiah to set things right. Rather they stood there by the River Jordon and heard him telling *them* to change. He was saying not that Rome needed to change or be overthrown, but that they themselves needed to repent and receive the forgiveness for their sins. The change he was preaching was not some top down change from one ruling regime to another but a change that started from the heart of a person and spread from there. Although the Bible doesn't say it, I imagine that as wildly popular as John the Baptizer was, there were a whole lot of people – maybe even more people - who thought he was insane and weren't about to look at their own need for change and let the oppressive Roman regime off the hook. "This is not what the people need to hear right now", some must have thought, "this man is as crazy as his reputation says!"

That was the first surprise, but then came the real kicker. While many of them were out there listening to John and some of those listening were in fact moved to step into the River Jordon, be cleansed from their sins in the hope of changing their lives to be more aligned to God's love and goodness, the Messiah shows up in the midst of them, or at least the one that John was saying was the Messiah. And his name was like Joe or Nick or Fred... no, it was Jesus, that's right. And he was from... like Monkton or Hinesburg or Vergennes or something... no, it was Nazareth, that's right. Well whatever his name and wherever he was from, it definitely wasn't remarkable, it was like random, insignificant, unnoticeable. And there he was standing in the midst of them listening to John and suddenly he steps out from among them and says "I want to be baptized." And

while it doesn't even register with anyone else, John stands there spell-bound as Jesus walks over to him in the Jordan and repeats "I want to be baptized too."

In the Gospel of Mark it just says that John baptized him. But the early Christian community was never fully comfortable with this as is evident in Matthew's rendition of the story where he has John saying – "I can't baptize you! I need to be baptized by you!" The historical Jesus scholars who like to make educated guesses about what were authentically Jesus' words and actions and what were those things embellished by the Gospel writers themselves, say that this is one of these moments that is highly probable that it was historic because the early Christian community would have never chosen to have their Lord and Savior, the one they are lifting up as God, asking to be baptized himself. They along with John were scandalized by the thought of it and never really had a good explanation for it.

But there we have it. Jesus gets baptized by John. It's the utter and complete subversion of what we expect and assume about the proper dynamics of power. If God, the Creator, the greatest power in the universe, were to reveal Himself to us, then we would fall to our knees in fear and groveling and utter submission before Him because we are such worthless worms! But instead, the one we call Lord and Savior and God presents himself before John and instead of expecting John to bow, he bows himself before John.

I imagine it's like that closing moment in the Lord of the Rings, you remember, when Aragorn finally assumes his rightful position as king and as he walks down the path atop Minas Tirith the throngs bow before him and the little hairy-footed hobbits are about to get down on their knees too when Aragorn says – "oh no, my friends, it is we who must bow before you," and he, the King, gets down on his knees along with everyone else before the hobbits, these little pure in heart humble creatures with no worldly power at all but whose purity of heart and humility was the only power great enough to withstand the lure of the evil ring of power. The greatest of human power not bowing to another earthly power but bowing to the power of love, truth, purity, which is the only power before which we as human beings should bow and pledge our allegiance. Allegiance to anything less than Love with a capital "L" is idolatry and will make us less than human.

And so Jesus Christ bows before the Christ in John and says baptize me and as John does so the voice from heaven says “This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased.” And immediately, it says, Jesus is led out deeper into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, the scriptures say. And this is the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ. It doesn’t say what the crowds did at that point but it must have been terribly disappointing, maybe even humiliating to John as he stood there watching this Jesus walk away into the desert. And with many a furrowed brow, I imagine, the crowd must have dispersed and returned to Jerusalem thoroughly unimpressed or depressed that this was what all the hubbub was about?! This was what the change and hope was for?! This human, this man, this weakling walking off sadly by himself to who knows where...

But I wonder if there were a few people in the crowd with hearts wide open enough, like maybe a child being pulled away by his mother, or the leper who was just to one side of the crowd, or the widowed woman who was sick with some kind of blood disease. I wonder if there were a few like them on the shore of the Jordon that day who sensed something more. I wonder if they stood there just a few minutes longer, while everyone else had turned to go, watching the small figure of this solitary man walk away down his lonely path, silhouetted against the late afternoon sky, head bowed against the whipping wind which signaled an approaching storm...