

Reflections of Jesus
January 11, 2015
(Gen1:1-5) Mark 1:4-11
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John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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 pleased."

*Take me to the water, take me to the water, take me to the water, to be baptized.
I love Jesus, I love Jesus, I love Jesus, Oh, yes I do.
Glory hallelujah, glory hallelujah, glory hallelujah, to be baptized.*

The first line of the Gospel reading today tells us that John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He's kind of a crazy dude – wearing camel hair clothing and eating bugs with wild honey. Yum! But ancient prophets (and perhaps, modern-day prophets) are not necessarily your run-of-the mill types. They're a little quirky, off-beat, memorable. The clothing connection was one of the reasons people thought that perhaps John the Baptist was Elijah, as it had been prophesied that Elijah would return. During this time of John the Baptist, the Jewish people were operating under the Leviticus laws of the Torah that demanded that when breaking a commandment, one went to a priest and was then given punishment and retribution proportionate to the degree of harm. If the wrongdoer was a person living in poverty, which was 95% of the population, the retribution could be adjusted at the discretion of the priests; for being told to "bring an ox" as a sacrifice could be all of the person's assets. This adjustment worked well with the law-abiding priests. However, archaeologists discovered huge mansions of the high priests at this time – the priests were benefitting financially from this system of repentance. Alternatively, lots of people who made mistakes and couldn't pay the price remained "sinners." John the Baptist said, "Come! Be baptized, and it's free, you don't have to pay a thing! Come before God for this purification rite."

John's appearance in the wilderness recalls not just Elijah but also Israel's wilderness wanderings in between deliverance from slavery in Egypt and entrance into the Promised Land. It was from the wilderness that they had stepped into and crossed the waters of the Jordan, remembering how the Red Sea had once parted for them. John invites people to come to be baptized, promising them a "right-now"

forgiveness of sins and yet admitting that one more powerful than he is on the way. A now and not-quite-yet reality. It's an in-between time. I can offer you this, now; but something even better is on its way. There is a sense of chaos with this crazy prophet and people from everywhere -- country-folk of Judea and the city-dwellers of Jerusalem, flocking to him to receive this baptism in the Jordan. A chaos not too unlike the formless void and darkness mentioned in the very first sentence of the Bible, read today from Genesis, where God creates order out of chaos and darkness by speaking, "Let there be light." John is there to testify to the light amidst the chaos of darkness.

Last week my son became very sick during our vacation in Tahoe. We came home on Friday night, and all day Saturday I waited with him at Urgent Care as he coughed and moaned with fever. Finally, ½ hour after the clinic was due to close, he was seen by a doctor, who prescribed a long list of medications for what was diagnosed as bronchitis. Off we went to the pharmacy; he waited in the car while the pharmacists filled the bottles and albuterol dispenser. It had been hours, and after receiving all of the prescriptions, I joyfully jumped into the car with the multiple bags labeled with their various instructions, backed out of the parking spot, and CRASH! -- the dreaded sound of metal on metal. I looked in the rearview mirror, and sure enough, there was a brand new car parked in the loading zone, that I had hit. I was not my best self – not when I made the unfortunate move to step on the gas pedal while backing up, nor just afterwards, as I hurled a couple of exasperated outbursts at the steering wheel.

I went back inside the pharmacy, waiting for one of the checkers to have a free moment from the endless line of customers, to request an announcement be made on the loudspeaker that the owner of the beautiful new Honda please come to the nearest check-out counter. Again I waited and waited, until at last one of the departing customers clicked a key that illuminated the lights on the smashed car. I made my way over to him. "Hiiii..." I said, "Is this your car?" I showed him the damage, handed over my insurance information, and much to my surprise, he was in awe, as if the heavens had split open and a dove had come down upon me. He shook his head, staring at me with bewilderment. "Most people would have just driven away," he said, "thank you so much." He thanked me for smashing into his brand new car. He's called me since, and continues to thank me. Now I'm the one bewildered. I'd like to think that most people would do what I did; in fact, it didn't even occur to me to leave the scene. Is our world really so unruly? So chaotic that people go around hitting someone's car and then drive away? By confessing our transgressions, we are then worthy of forgiveness, as the man had so graciously shown me. It is through repentance that we are able to experience God's grace. By intending to come clean, we are set free. God does not want us to be estranged; God wants reconciliation for us – reconciliation with other people, and reconciliation with God. As it turns out, the man whose car I hit is a theologian. We have developed quite a friendship through this ordeal, which has given me new perspective on order out of chaos.

Baptism is known in our tradition as an outward and visible sign of God's inward and invisible grace. The people come clamoring to John the Baptist because they long for that feeling of freedom, of being forgiven, of being accepted. The end of the passage read today speaks of Jesus then being baptized by his cousin, John the Baptist, and as he comes up out of the water, the tearing apart of the heavens (reminding us of the tearing apart of the curtain in the temple just after Jesus takes his last breath on the cross). The Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove and a voice from heaven speaks, "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased."

The Rev. Dr. David Lose points out in Mark's story of Jesus' baptism two particular things. First: God's words to Jesus, which are personal, poignant, and powerful. "*You are my beloved son. With you I am well pleased.*" Wrapped in these words of acceptance are the blessings of identity, worth, and unwavering regard. God affirms this again at the Transfiguration on the mountaintop.

Second, we notice that these words come just before Jesus' temptation and the start of Jesus' ministry. The event Jesus' baptism isn't incidental to Mark's story about Jesus; it's foundational. Indeed, it comes immediately after the introductory verses and so stands as the very first episode of Jesus' life that the Gospel of Mark shares with us.

Similarly, Jesus' baptism isn't preamble to all that comes later in his life; it's the highpoint and climax of the story in a nutshell. Again and again, as Jesus casts out unclean spirits, heals the sick, feeds the hungry, and welcomes the outcast, he will only do to others what has already been done to him, telling them via word and deed that they, too, are beloved children of God with whom God is well pleased. And the darkest moment of the Gospel story, when Jesus feels absolutely abandoned on the cross, is followed immediately by the story of resurrection, a testament that God has kept God's baptismal promise and continues to accept and honor Jesus as God's own beloved Son. So also, at our low moments, we might remember that the God who raised Jesus from the dead is the same one who promised in baptism to never abandon us and to love and accept us always and still as beloved children, even and especially when we have a hard time loving and accepting ourselves.

Baptism is so incredibly important because it offers us the acceptance of God and thereby empowers us to accept others in turn. Baptism reminds us that wherever we may go and whatever we may do or have done to us, God continues to love us, accept us, and hold onto us. The promise of baptism is that we are "marked by the cross of Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit forever." We are part of God's family, we are related to Christ, we are reflections of Christ. Baptism is our initiation into the church community. I have heard it mentioned a number of times recently that the church is a family. Indeed, it is. It is a place where we come and are accepted and loved, where we share Christ's love and acceptance with one another. As Presbyterians, we honor baptism at any age: infant, child, youth, adult. Most recently, we welcomed Olivia Kim here at the font this past November. When

baptized as a youth or adult, as was my case at age 13, the baptism is accompanied by one's affirmation of faith in becoming a member of the church.

I would like to invite you now to come forward to the font and collect a glass stone as a symbol of remembrance and affirmation of your own baptism, and of God's healing, cleansing and claiming love for each of us. If you have not been baptized, you are still welcome to come forward as God extends grace to all who are willing to accept it.

(Congregants come forward to receive a glass stone and blessing)

God's mercies are bountiful, and God's gifts are unrestrained. For those of you who did not want to come forward at this time, feel free to talk with me after the service, I will be available. For those of you who have not yet been baptized, if you have an interest, feel free to speak with me after the service or at a later time and I would love to discuss this opportunity with you.