

“Baptized and Sent”
Scripture: Mark 1:9-13
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January 8, 2006 may be what your calendar says to you today but on the liturgical calendar—the church year—this is the “Baptism of the Lord” Sunday. After the Christmas season, we move to the baptism of Jesus, recounted in all four Gospels. Baptism is a wonderful theme for any sermon. You may have heard the story of the minister that mentioned baptism in every sermon. After a while the Session became a bit aggravated with this theme and asked the minister to preach on something else. The Session went so far as to assign the preaching text: Genesis 1:1—“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”...a text, to their thinking, that had nothing to do with baptism. The minister agreed. The following Sunday after reading the text, “God created the heavens and the earth,” the minister went on to say, “And we all know more than two-thirds of the earth is covered with water.” Some ruts are just hard to get out of!

The three main pieces of furniture in a Presbyterian sanctuary are the pulpit, the table, and the baptismal fount. Everything else is extra—the organ, the stained glass windows, the carpet, even the pews. What is essential to Presbyterian worship is clearly stated in these three pieces of furniture.

Now note the size of each—which in some ways marks how we have emphasized these in our worship. The pulpit is big and imposing. You perhaps have been in churches where the pulpit is even more imposing—sometimes raised and lifted up. The pulpit is reminder that we are “Word” centered—centered on the proclamation of Scripture. The open Bible is a reminder of where our faith is enriched and governed. Again, in classic Presbyterian architecture, the pulpit is at the center.

Next in size, of course, is the table. Presbyterians have clearly spoken that it is a table and not an altar. An altar is a place for a sacrifice...the table is a place for a meal. Our sacramental tradition is that the table is a place of fellowship—with God and with each other. And the table is typically on the floor and at the center—an architectural reminder that the table is to be for and with the people.

The third symbol is the baptismal fount. Visually, it is the smallest of our central pieces of furniture. In some sanctuaries the baptismal fount fades from view. The massive pulpit...the center table...and then the little fount. It makes understandable that tall tale of the severe drought that once took place in rural south Georgia. The drought got bad that when it came to baptism, the Baptists went to sprinkling. The Methodists used a wet cloth. And the Presbyterians took a rain check.

The little fount...and yet in some ways, what happens at the pulpit and at the table can only take place on the basis of what begins here at the fount. Now we have we have some flexibility in this sanctuary: the pulpit that is usually in the center is moved over to one side of the platform. The table is at the center, though a good case could be made for placing the baptismal font at the center, since baptism is the theme for today.

As I mentioned, the suggested text for the first Sunday after the Christmas season is the story of Jesus’ baptism. We read from the Gospel of Mark today, which clearly sees Jesus’ baptism a defining moment in his life and ministry. Remember that in the Gospel of Mark, we are told nothing about his birth, his

childhood, and all typical biographical details that we expect. The Gospel of Mark does not appear to be concerned about anything prior to Jesus' baptism. So, in the first chapter of Mark, following a brief introduction of John the Baptist, here is how Jesus first appears:

Mark 1:9-13: ⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." ¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Mark's gospel is known for its very simple, direct telling, without many details...details that fascinate us as we try to visualize the scene. Was the Jordan River deep? Were there lots of people there? Did anyone see the Spirit descend? Who heard the voice of God? Jesus alone? Or, did the rest of the people hear?

There is some energy in asking about these details, but the text does not give them. And when we start filling in the details, we begin to go beyond the text. What I want to do is hold is to the text...shake it up and ask what is going on. Let's stay with the text and consider some of the clues there: the rending of the heavens...the Spirit descending on Jesus...a voice is saying, "This is God's Son."

Taking these clues, where else in this Gospel does it said that Jesus is the Son of God? A surprisingly few times! It is surprising particularly because the title promises that is what this document, this writing, is all about. The Gospel of Mark begins with a sentence fragment: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Most scholars take that to be the title of the book: the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The writing is anonymous—by church tradition, it is attributed to an early follower of Jesus named Mark. The title is this initial sentence fragment that promises that this gospel is about the Son of God. "The Son of God" ...it is said by God here at the baptism—so God knows it. It said by the demons that are cast out by this Jesus—they know it. It is said again by God in a story called the Transfiguration in the ninth chapter of Mark. There God says: "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him."

But we have to go all the way to the end of this gospel to find a *person* who actually voices: This is God's Son. We have to go to the end of the Gospel before someone gets it: this is God's Son. Consider this scene from the 15th chapter of Mark:

Mark 15: 37-39: ³⁷Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. ³⁸And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. ³⁹Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

Let's look at the details. The text says twice, "Jesus breathed his last." Literally, the word "breathed" here is the preposition "ex," which means "out from" and the verb form of the word for "spirit." The English parallel would be the word, "expire," which literally means "to let the spirit out." Jesus released the Spirit.

And then there is a rending of something—not the heavens, but the curtain in the Temple that separated the congregation, the secular world from the holy presence of God in the Temple. We know from the Jewish historian Josephus that this curtain was some 80 feet high, dark blue in color, and depicted on it was the night sky...the heavens. On this curtain is the panorama of the heavens. So what is torn in two? A curtain that depicts the heavens.

And then what does a voice say? A Roman army officer says: This is God's Son.

Let's return to the details of the baptism. We don't know how deep the Jordan River was at Jesus' baptism. We don't know whether John sprinkled or immersed. We don't know what other people saw and heard. The Gospel does not give us those details. But this Gospel is surely trying to tell us that there is a connection between Jesus' baptism and his crucifixion. At his baptism there is the Spirit descending upon Jesus...at his death the Spirit is released. At his baptism, there is the rending of the heavens—God will not be boxed into heaven. At his crucifixion, there is the rending of the temple curtain, a depiction of the heavens. God will not be boxed into a place called the Temple. And a divine voice says at the baptism, at the beginning, "This is my Son." And a voice at the crucifixion—a human voice—finally gets it and declares, "This is God's Son."

What's going on here? Here's what is clear. What it means to be God's Son is not to be found in the success as the world defines success. We, the hearers of the story, know at his baptism that this is God's Son. No one else figures that out until we reach the end of this Gospel. What does it mean to be God's Son? It includes crucifixion. Here is where a person recognizes Jesus as the Son of God.

So baptism is deadly. The apostle Paul understood this. He said to be baptized is to be baptized into the death of Jesus. Not what we typically think about at baptism. We, Presbyterians, who along with many other traditions, practice infant baptism. It is wonderful, gracious moment as we welcome a child into the life of the church. The parents are smiling; the baby is always adorable; it is a high, holy, and happy moment.

What we often forget is that baptism is also dangerous. It marks us God's children...just like it marked Jesus. I truly have to say that our Baptist brothers and sisters tend to get closer to this aspect of the Biblical understanding of baptism. The process of immersion is symbolic of being buried...of being drowned...of dying with Christ. And the process of raising the person up out of the water is a powerful metaphor for the new life that we are to have in Christ through our baptism.

Now I am not ready to throw out our tradition of infant baptism...but I do want to name a lack...a common deficiency in our Presbyterian practice. Baptism is dangerous to our self-will, to our self-control, to our understanding that "I am the captain of my destiny." When Jesus is baptized, we are told the Spirit drove him into the wilderness...this not a gentle nudge, not a "do you feel okay with this" sort of thing. The verb is almost violent—the root of the word is the same word for "throw." The Spirit threw him out into the wilderness. When you are baptized, you are no longer your own. You are at the mercy and direction of God's Spirit.

And consider the Spirit in baptism. The heavens are torn open and the Spirit descends upon Jesus. What does it look like to be spiritual...look at Jesus. Sometimes I hear people say that they are not religious but they are spiritual. Spiritual is defined in terms of what they feel or what's going on inside

them. But for us, what it means to be spiritual is found in the one whom the Spirit descended. And for Jesus, to be spiritual comes down to the practice of the love of neighbor and the love of God. To be spiritual means shaking off what the world names as success. The comedian songwriter Ray Stevens used to sing a song about television evangelists who were decked out in glitz and Ray Stevens asked the question: “Would Jesus wear a Rolex?” What it means to be spiritual is bigger than taking care of myself and my family...bigger than my home and my country...more all encompassing than other callings. Baptism claims us totally...because it claims our dying as well as our living.

Baptism is the defining moment for Jesus and for all God’s children. We may not understand our baptism when it happens—whether because we were an infant or because we were a teenager doing what every one else was doing. No one seems to have understood Jesus’ baptism when it happened. Baptism only becomes clear at the cross. There, says the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is recognized as the Son of God.

In this new calendar year with resolutions about how to live better and fuller, we are reminded that our baptism means a dying as it did for Jesus. Perhaps not a death on a cross, but a dying to self-will, a dying to self-centeredness, a dying to “It is all about me.” The writer Fredrich Buechner has said that the gospel is often bad news before it is good news...that there is dying before there is living...there is a funeral before there is life. The gospel of Mark tells much the same story. This document starts off, “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of the God.” And the Gospel of Mark basically ends at the crucifixion of Jesus—remember there are no stories of the resurrection in the earliest form of this Gospel. This Gospel does not end with a glorious telling of the Easter story but rather with some frightened women who have come to the empty tomb...and at least they had the courage to go, the rest of the men seem to have completely run off. This is the beginning of the Gospel—it begins with baptism that defines Jesus as a child of God that is connected to the cross, where the Sonship is finally seen and understood. This is the beginning...there is more to come...but getting the beginning right is vital.

This is a beginning that moves from baptism to the cross. Our baptism means we are willing to die...and in dying, we find life. This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.