

The Story of Jesus' Baptism
 (or, "Do YOU Ever Give Much
 Thought to Your Own Baptism?")
 Mark 1:1-11 (NRSV)
 January 11, 2009
 Ordination/Installation Sunday
 Oakland Avenue PCUSA
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Mark 1:1-11 (NRSV)

- 1 *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*
- 2 *As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;*
- 3 *the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"*
- 4 *John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*
- 5 *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.*
- 6 *Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.*
- 7 *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.*
- 8 *I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*
- 9 *In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.*
- 10 *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.*
- 11 *And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*

In the midst of all the bad news that you see on television or on the radio or that you read in the newspapers, I have some GOOD NEWS for you. And the Good News is this:

**There is a God, and
 God loves you!**

Whenever bad news may come your way in 2009, remember the Good News:

**There is a God, and
 God loves you!**

In the church year that lies before us, the Common Lectionary is going to center its gospel passages in *The Gospel of Mark*. Our passage before us today begins that emphasis, and we should all take note that *The Gospel of Mark* is the only one of the four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – which actually, in print, claims to BE a gospel!

In both the King James Version and the Revised Standard Version, the verse says:

“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

But it is even clearer and a better translation of the Greek language in the Today’s English Version translation which says:

“This is the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

This reminds us, of course, that the word “**Gospel**” means “**Good News.**” And

the Good News is that
**there is a God, and
 God loves you!**

NOW, LISTEN TO THIS:

It is the classic, orthodox teaching of the Christian church down through the ages that if you want to know anything at all about this God who loves you, you have got to get to know Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

- Jesus is the one about whom the gospel-writer Mark tells us.
- Jesus is the one who is concerned about loving relationships among people.
- Jesus is the one who teaches the truth.
- Jesus is the one who wants us all to be physically and mentally and spiritually whole and healthy.
- Jesus is the one who stresses service above self.
- Jesus is the one who willingly pays the penalty for the sins of the world.
- Jesus is the one who overcomes death and the grave.

And what does all of this mean? It means that

**there is a God, and
 God loves you!**

Today’s text, involving the first 11 verses of the book of Mark are packed full of information. For a preacher, it is one of those “multi-directional” passages, one from which the preacher can take off in many directions. **The direction that I have chosen to follow today is centered in verses 9-11.**

It is the familiar BAPTISM scene which is pictured in all three synoptic gospels:

Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

The fourth gospel, *The Gospel of John*, has John bearing witness that he saw the Holy Spirit descend like a dove upon Jesus, but he does not mention anything at all about a baptism.

If you want an interesting devotional experience, take a few minutes and compare how the gospels deal with this story, noting how the accounts differ and how they are alike.

One of the reasons that I have chosen to center on **verses 9 – 11** is because of our ordination and installation ceremony this morning for our Elders and Deacons. Just as the baptism experience was a pivotal time in the life of Jesus, so is this ordination and installation ceremony a pivotal time in the life of our new Elders and Deacons.

Now, I must be quite above-board with you and tell you that down through the centuries various Christians of all kinds have **differed** in understanding the importance of this passage.

Showing my own prejudice, some Christians, whom I would categorize as tending to believe in a “**magical Jesus**,” have held that Jesus always knew who He was as the Son of God, even from his earliest childhood. Now for me personally, this view seems to short-change the human side of Jesus. For those who hold this “**magical Jesus**” view, the baptism experience of Jesus is nothing more than the first public appearance of Jesus in his adult ministry.

It is his “coming out” party.
It is his public ordination service.
It is his taking the oath of office.

On the other hand, there are some Christians, of whom I am one, who view the baptism experience of Jesus as the time when Jesus realizes who he is **to be** in his role as *the Messiah*, or *the Christ*, or *the Anointed One of God*.

It is true that prior to this time Jesus may have been growing in this kind of understanding, but it is not until this pivotal event of baptism that Jesus knows who he is and the role he is to play in the redemption of the world.

One of my very favorite scenes in the literary world is in Alex Haley’s novel **Roots** which later became a television serial depicting the African ancestry of Black American slavery. Near the beginning of the story, Alex Haley describes the special African event of naming a child on the eighth day.

Omoró [the father] then walked out before all of the assembled people of the village. Moving to his wife's side, he lifted the infant and, as all watched, whispered three times into his son's ear the name he had chosen for him. It was the first time the name had ever been spoken as this child's name, for Omoro's people felt that each human being should be the first to know who he was."

[*Emphasis*, Lima, Ohio, C.S.S. Publishing Company,
Vol. #14, #8, January, 1985, p. 10)

The gospel-writer Mark remembers:

"And a voice came from heaven,
'You are my son, the Beloved;
with you I am well pleased.'"
(V. 11, NRSV)

Now, I wonder about something, and I would be interested in what you think.

Would you agree with me that it is a natural extension of today's story (about Jesus hearing God tell him that God was pleased with him) for you and me to raise a question for ourselves as we try to live as followers of Jesus? The question is this:

WHOM AM I TRYING TO PLEASE WITH MY LIFE?

Another thing that I have been wondering about takes the form of another question.

**Is it the role of the Christian, your role and my role,
in imitation of Jesus,
to try to please no one but God?**

Mark remembers:

**"...and a voice came from heaven,
'You are my son, the Beloved;
with you I am well-pleased.'"**

I heard this story about the early days of life at Winthrop University. It involved the days when automobiles were not so numerous and a young girl boarded a train to go for her first year in college in a town some distance from home. It would be her first experience away from her parents, her friends, and the familiar people and places of her childhood and youth.

Her mother, clearly concerned about the uncertain environment awaiting her daughter at Winthrop, handed her an envelope and instructed her not to open it until she arrived at Winthrop.

When the young girl had settled into her room in the dorm, she opened the envelope and read one simple sentence: **“Just remember who you are.”**

Mark remembers:

**“...and a voice came from heaven,
‘You are my son, the Beloved;
with you I am well-pleased.’”**

This past week as I was writing this sermon, it started out to be directed at the new Elders and Deacons who are being ordained and installed in this service.

Upon second thought, it probably ought to be directed at us all.

**If you heard the voice of God speak out of the clouds to you,
what do you think that God would say about you?**