

Mark 1:4-11
Jan 8, 2012

South Plains

The Messy Spirit of Baptism

When we lived in Richmond, our four year old son Matthew was attacked by a mocking bird outside our apartment. Mocking birds will dive after cats and crows for no apparent reason except to harass them. This bird swooped out of the sky to draw blood from our four year old's cotton-topped head. He wasn't really hurt, just scared. Mark's gospel says that the heavens were ripped apart when the Holy Spirit descended like a dove on Jesus at his baptism. I wonder if Jesus was as startled as our son when this heavenly dove-Holy Spirit hit him in the River Jordan. Mark describes the experience as though Jesus was the only person actually to hear the voice from heaven identifying him as God's Son.

"He saw the heavens torn apart and" and he saw "the Spirit descending like a dove on him...." And he heard "a voice ... from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved." I doubt that he blurted out, "Who me?" but I'll bet there was surprise on his face.

We celebrate the 'Baptism of the Lord' today for two reasons. First, Jesus' baptism clearly identifies him as the Son of God. This is the definitive moment at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, his introduction to the world, and the reason for writing and reading the gospel. Jesus'

baptism is the starting place to learn about the meaning of his life and message. Thus, we start the year with his baptism. Second, our own baptism follows the pattern laid down by John the Baptizer. Jesus is exhibit one. Baptism identifies us as children of God just as it identified Jesus as the Son of God. We're not divine, but we are adopted children. It's not a magic moment for us any more than it was a magic moment for Jesus. It's a call to service. There's a lot to do, lots of change coming, and lots of challenge ahead. For all these reasons baptism marks a beginning in our lives for the work of the Holy Spirit.

Today I want to invite you to remember your baptism. Don't worry if you can't remember the occasion or if you've not been baptized. We baptize adults and children in worship in order to help us recall the meaning of our baptism. Jesus' experience in the River Jordan reminds us how messy and life-changing this sacrament can be for us.

I've seen pictures of Jesus' baptism depicting fluffy clouds with sunbeams peeping through, a gently flowing Jordan with John and Jesus in waist-deep water and an adoring crowd on the bank. Perhaps a small, white dove flutters above the halo around Jesus' head. In real life, the Jordan is often muddy. All the gospels make John out as fierce and rough-hewn with animal skins for clothing and food dug out of the wild. Mark explicitly denies a sweet sky, telling us instead that the heavens were ripped apart by the descent of the Holy Spirit upon

Jesus. When I read these verses, I hear a storm that breaks suddenly like lightning on a summer's day.

God is entering a messy and dangerous world. Oh, it's happened before right here on the banks of the Jordan, at the crossing of the Red Sea and dozens of other Old Testament venues. The difference is that now God enters as a human being, vulnerable to the elements, subject to temptation and intensely liable to being rejected. Jesus will need to know who he is, the beloved Son of God, if he is to maintain his integrity.

Our baptism tells us that we are loved by God. We are the beloved sons and daughters of the Creator of the world. This is worth remembering when so often we don't feel loved or special or when we discover we are inadequate for the challenges that life throws at us. "Who are you?" That's the question the priests and Levites hurled at John. It's the same question torturing Pilate when he confronts Jesus. Jesus knew it didn't matter what other people thought of him. He knew who he was. Do we know who we are?

Baptism describes what it means to be loved by God: we are sons and daughters who belong to God, a heavenly Father Jesus calls "Abba," or "Daddy." Most people want to belong to something or someone. With few exceptions, to whatever or whomever we belong will define in large measure how we think of ourselves. When I was in Rotary, I repeated the purpose of Rotary International at every lunch meeting. As I came to know

my fellow Rotarians over the years, I realized that those ideals defined the people we all wanted to become. And, I could see how ideals of honesty and helpfulness shaped the club's activities and our individual lives. Baptism and the baptismal creeds we confess each Sunday work the same way.

Who are you? You are the beloved children of God, adopted into the family by the ritual of baptism. Many of us do not remember our baptism. I was too young and it wasn't very memorable for me. It was for my parents, however. They told me the story again and again as I grew up. As I learned more of the meaning of that day in my life, I paid attention to every baptism in church. Each time I watched the water sprinkled on a person's head, it added a layer of meaning, like an onion growing larger, layer by layer as the words and water nourished my spirit.

I've wondered sometimes about that voice from heaven when the heavens tore apart. Did God's voice boom out like thunder? Or, did God speak in that still, small voice that spoke to Elijah after the wind had died? Often people, who were baptized a long time ago, wonder how it helps them today. I know when I have a difficult decision to make about the church or a messy counseling situation to negotiate, I have often wished for loud, clear directions from the Lord. My prayer is, "Tell me what to do, Lord! Even if you don't tell me everything, at least give me the next step, the next word to speak so I don't look wishy-washy and stupid." Most of the time,

however, any answer I get to that prayer comes in a quiet nudge requiring a faith that is not very strong, and a need for hope in what is unseen, and more love than comes easily to me. Mark indicates that only Jesus heard the voice from heaven on that day. The rest of the story of Jesus' life and ministry bears that out. If the crowds flocking to John, "all Jerusalem" the gospel says, had heard and seen what Mark describes, surely more people would have gathered in his support that day on Golgotha.

When the crowds deserted Jesus; when even his twelve closest friends fled; when the teachers of the law who had been so impressed by the twelve year old boy in the temple not only abandoned him but actively sought his death, the anchor that Jesus held to was the memory of his baptism: the sky ripping apart like a womb at birth; and a secret voice unmistakably confirming who he is – the beloved Son of God.

When Jesus emerged from the river, muddy and wet, he looked like every other person who had been baptized that day, disheveled but strangely content. The messiness of a river baptism reminds us that God has entered our earthy world, a world a world where decisions are often muddy and repentance for sin is a daily need. It helps to remember we are loved, well loved children of God.

I'm going to place our baptismal bowl with water on your right as you leave the sanctuary. I invite you to dip your fingers in the water and remember your baptism.

You may choose to make the sign of the cross on your forehead, or just pause to think about how beloved you are as a child of God.