

Baptism (of our Lord); Mk 1:9-20

January 10, 2016 | Patrick Preheim

Prayer: In this season of Epiphany, this season of divine revelation, we give thanks to you, O God, who is made known in the baptism of Jesus. May you be revealed in our world as we too embrace and live our baptisms. Amen.

I want to link our journey through the Bible, the Gospel of Mark, with a scripture text being read in many other congregations this day—the "Baptism of our Lord".

Theologian William Willimon has said about baptism: "When you join the Rotary club, they give you a handshake and a lapel pin. When you join the church, we throw water on you." Jesus was baptised, many of us have been baptised, a few of us resist baptism, but what does baptism really mean? What does it mean to us, what does it mean to God, what does it mean in Mark's gospel, what does it mean in Mennonite theology. These are the questions I want to explore this morning. I will follow the structure of the biblical text of Jesus' baptism to organize my thoughts.

Differently than the other gospels Mark begins his account of the Good News with baptisms. John offers baptism of repentance along the Jordan. Jesus receives baptism. The call of the disciples by Jesus, which is a type of baptism, is a part of this early Gospel sequence as well. Baptism is the platform upon which the remainder of the story is predicated. Baptism in Mark's gospel has overtones of personal openness, sacred acceptance, un-savory confrontation, discipleship, and ultimately divine victory. I will consider each of these, interspersing personal testimonies along the way.

Personal Openness

Spiritual renewal happens on the margins of our comfort zone rather than the fortresses of our security (Ched Myers, *Say to This Mountain: Mark's Story of Discipleship*, 6-7). I spoke about this in Advent on John the Baptist Sunday, and it bears repeating. All of the baptisms to which I have alluded, all of them, appear on the geographic margins of 1st century Jewish life. John is baptising people away from the historical centre of the Jerusalem Temple. Jesus travels from Galilee to the Jordan River Basin to receive baptism, not Jerusalem or one of the cultic centres. And then Jesus returns to the hinter region of Galilee, not a school of religion, to call his first disciples. As I previously noted, we have in these baptism stories the tension between two archetypically opposite symbolic spaces: Temple and Wilderness—center and margins. Let me share a few ways we get to the margins in 21st century urban Canada.

In addition to making ourselves open to those who live across the tracks or river, we go to church. And sometimes the Archie Rumps of the world come to us here. If you want to know more about Archie take a moment to chat with Lorraine, Cam Forrester, Alta Peachy, Ernie or Donna Epp. Let me speak for a moment about church. If you didn't know it, many of our friends are enjoying a dark roast coffee and unhurriedly reading through the Globe and Mail while we are here. That is, of course, unless they prefer sports to news; in which case they have stoked the BBQ for the noon kick-off of the Vikings and Seahawks. Do you people know I once lived in Minnesota, root for the Vikings, and would probably be at home myself were it not for my day job? I love leisurely reading of the paper and I love Vikings football, but I am here. There are ten different places each of us could be this morning, but we are here. In this day in

age going to Sunday morning church is bit like going to the wilderness to meet wild men and women speaking about spiritual renewal. And being present in the wilderness is an indication of openness. When a person comes to the wilderness seeking regeneration often it happens: in a song, in a silence, in a scripture reading, in a sermon. These are little baptism moments. A paragraph in an Allan Klassen sermon from 2009, in fact, convicted me. I got his permission to share it with you again.

“Some fifty years ago I was baptized in my home congregation at Aberdeen. Sometimes I wish I could do it over again. I believe it was a reasonably thoughtful and earnest action on my part at the time, but I think it would have a more profound meaning now because being fifty years further down the road life’s experiences and encounters have made a difference. But lest my longings deter folks here from taking the significant step of baptism, let me hasten to add that “conversion” and baptism is not about arriving at the destination, but much more about launching out on the journey. They are less about having discovered the truth and much more about our declaration of a desire to be part of the search” (Allan Klassen, “Conversion or Calling”; a sermon preached at NPMC on June 28, 2009).

Sacred Acceptance

At the time of Jesus’ baptism we have this powerful image of the heavens “torn open” with God’s Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove. This word for “torn open” (σχιζω) is also used by the Gospel writer when Jesus dies on the cross and the temple curtain is torn (15.38). The space between heaven and earth is rent asunder when we offer God our lives and our sacrifices.

Would the dove have come to him if Jesus had chosen ritual cleansing in the temple rather than the wilderness? It may have been dangerous for that divine bird since doves were sacrificed in the temple (Lev 5.7; Lk 2.24). Doves were offered for the forgiveness of sins. The song of this gentle bird is the voice of a proud parent, God offering Jesus to the world with, “This is my Son in whom I am well pleased”. This isn’t the ax-wielding, fire-burning God that John the Baptist talked about (Lk 3.7-9). This is a loving parent who is proud not of what Jesus has done, but of the direction Jesus has chosen. As far as we can tell, Jesus hasn’t done anything worth mentioning so far. Now at approximately age 30 Jesus has made a decision for openness to God, for directing his actions in God’s way, for a willingness to go with God wherever it will lead. Before his birth God chose Jesus, and now Jesus has responded to God’s love. This is all implied in baptism. God has chosen us before we have said or done anything noteworthy. God has chosen, and loves us, from before the time of our birth. This raises a really important question for me and all of us. How do we remember, dwell in, soak up that love God has for us?

Too often, I think, we do not believe we are worthy of God’s love. We look at our lives and are aware of all the imperfections. We look at the attitudes and actions of others and wonder how God can love those people. Judgmentalism, of ourselves and others, is pervasive in our society. We are, though, formed in the image of God and God chooses to love us. God’s love of our image, the story goes, gives us strength to grow into God’s likeness. I can stand up here and with all certainty and conviction of my theological training declare that you are loved. I can preach that God loves each of us as a beloved son or daughter. I can shout at you that GOD LOVES YOU. But how do you or any of us come to own this love? And this is critical. For us to grow into the

likeness of God we must find ways of treasuring God's love of us. We are creatures formed in the image of the Creator and invited to grow into her likeness.

Gratitude can help us remember God's love of us. Janice Kaplan recently authored a book entitled *Gratitude Diaries*; the promotion of the book reads, "Janice Kaplan spends a year living gratefully and gains a fresh outlook that transforms her marriage, family life, work, health, and every day experience". When walking to or from church I often lapse into the Jesus Prayer which reminds me of God's mercy for me, and presumably others. I know people who recover a sense of God's love on God's love as they meditate on trees, the river, a plant. Scripture, our beloved scripture, often allows us to remember again God's love. All of these, and more, open us to God's acceptance of us. Back to our biblical text.

Even as God identified with Jesus in the dove Jesus identified with humanity with his baptism. It is significant that Jesus is baptized at all. Baptism was for the forgiveness of sins, we read in Mark 1:4-5, and Jesus was supposed to be without sin (Jn1.47). God is proud of Jesus just because he is Jesus and he is humble enough to get in the muddy river with muddy people. He joins the line with the liars, shoplifters, murderers and adulterers. Wallowing around in the Jordan River with sinners is a powerful image. He understands that living into our identity and calling happens on the way. In accepting baptism Jesus was accepting those intent in spiritual renewal. We may sometimes think that baptism is all about us. Well, this story tells it differently. Baptism is, in part, a decision to identify with others. Jesus accepts us and walks along side us as grow into the likeness of God.

Testing

A part of the journey, we must also note, will entail temptation and confrontation. Looking at the first chapter of Mark we recognize that the authorities arrested John the Baptist for encouraging baptism. Immediately after baptism Jesus faced temptation in the wilderness. An unclean spirit accosts the disciples shortly after their call. The linkages between baptism and resistance are real. This reality stems from the fact that people living their baptisms threaten the "rulers, authorities and cosmic powers" (Eph 6.12) of the world.

Discipleship

John the Baptist subverted the institutional authority of the temple. Jesus negated the power of Cesar and death itself to control us. Practicing peace and charity the disciples undercut the power of state religion and empire to manipulate its citizens. This is the plot line for the remainder of Mark's gospel, and baptism gets it all started. The rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers can not stand this, and they lash out. Resistance by the powers, I heard a theologian once say, is the surest sign your community is actually engaged in significant ministry. The powers are relatively uninterested in those watching Jesus from the side-lines; it is those following Jesus that attract their attention (William Willimon at Saskatoon). The powers try to extinguish that flame of renewal before it becomes a torch. Testing happens. Any Sunday given over to baptism should invite us to prepare for it. In the end, though, God triumphs.

God Wins

As I mentioned earlier in Mark's gospel the death of Jesus is linguistically linked to the baptism of Jesus. Death does not distance Jesus from God and neither does death separate us from God. God simply does not accept a situation in which his beloved and

beloveds are separated from him. As Paul eloquent wrote in his letter to the Roman churches: nothing can separate us from the love of God. Upon examination a few days later the tomb is empty. Jesus still lives.

And how about those disciples who flee the tomb after finding it empty and having a brief conversation with an angel? Clearly they came around, otherwise the experience would have been lost. We would not have Mark's gospel and we would not have a church. God was merciful and patient, shaping their lives as they were open. We are those disciples, and we develop like those disciples. In spite of our sinfulness and capitulation to the powers, God seeks opportunities to work in our lives. I firmly believe I am more in God's likeness this decade than last— still in need of work but progressing. God is slowly but surely shaping the character of a well meaning and yet incomplete pastor. As I remember my baptism, and embrace little baptism moments, God continues shaping me. And God does this for all who are open to the spiritual renewal he offers. God give us the grace to identify with the baptism of our Lord, embrace baptism, and be open to all the additional baptism moments God will bring to our lives. Amen.

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