



## “Practicing Baptism”

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*Mark 1:4-11*

I heard this story once about a preacher who was a recent seminary graduate and was appointed to his very first congregation. He and his wife went to visit his family one Saturday afternoon for lunch. The preacher's mother sensed that her daughter-in-law was withdrawn and silent, but not wanting to be one of those nosey, meddlesome mothers-in-law, she pretended not to notice. She figured it was just a little lover's quarrel. But as her son and daughter-in-law left, everything was immediately cleared up because she overheard her daughter-in-law say to her son, “All right, we can go by the church and you can practice baptizing me just one more time. But remember this, when you have your first funeral, you are not going to practice burying me!”

It's true. In seminary, when I was at Wake Forest Divinity School in Winston-Salem, we would go to a local Baptist church and practice baptizing each other. We would match up both men and women, tall and short, just to make sure we experienced what it was like to baptize all different kinds of people that we might have in our congregations. In fact, one of my classmates thought it would be funny to come into the water with a snorkel and a shower cap on. True story. Practicing the act of baptism was important for me as I developed my ministry skills. And it got me thinking about how the practicing of our baptisms is extremely essential in our own journeys as followers of Christ. We are called to live out our baptisms and practice our baptisms in the world, so that we can show people that we follow the example of Jesus, weighted by water and energized with the Holy Spirit.

Today we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord. In early Christian thought, the Christmas season wouldn't be over until after this particular Sunday. And according to the lectionary, the story of Jesus's baptism was supposed to be the text last week rather than the visitation of the magi. But, I value both the epiphany and journey of the magi to Jesus, as well as this text today about Jesus being baptized. So, I have brought us back to this important part of Jesus's life. The baptism of Jesus is important because everything in Jesus's life as a baby, a child, and a young adult culminated in this point, his baptism at the beginning of the Gospel of Mark.

Remember from our ongoing study of Mark on Wednesday evenings that Jesus's baptism “marked” not only the beginning of the Gospel, it marked the beginning of his earthly ministry, his practicing of his faith, and his action in the world. But before Jesus could practice his faith out among the people, he had to enter the wilderness. We see, with the coming of John the Baptizer at the beginning of this text, that our baptisms often happen, often take place, in the wilderness. For most of us, this isn't a physical wilderness – it's a spiritual or emotional wilderness. Our lives feel like a wilderness, don't they? How many of us have everything together, all the loose ends tied up, and are living perfect lives? And, how many of us feel like we haven't done anything wrong since we rose out of the baptismal waters and were born again? I would guess none of us would feel as if our lives are easy and without the wild and rough

edges. Journeying through life is a wilderness experience and the Gospel of Mark shows us that when we practice our baptisms, we can survive and thrive in the wilderness.

You see, Mark is the only Gospel to begin the story of Jesus with his presence in the wilderness. The Gospel of Luke begins with Zechariah, a priest in a holy city, in a holy temple. And the Gospel of John's first line is, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." But, Mark's Gospel doesn't start at the beginning of Jesus's birth or at the beginning of creation. Our text today begins right in the middle of Jesus's life, in the middle of the wilderness, and was written when the early church was in the middle of persecution by the Roman Empire. It begins in the middle.

And it is in this middle, this in between time, that the spirit descended on Jesus like a dove. No, not AS a dove. A pretty, white dove didn't fly down and land on Jesus's shoulder like a parrot. The Spirit descended LIKE a dove, like a powerfully peaceful presence, hovering harmony over the disturbed waters of the Jordan River. Scholars remind us that in the first chapter of the book of Genesis that the spirit of God hovered, loitered, lingered over the face of the deep, and that chaos was already happening. It's almost as if we jump into the middle of the story, that existence was a mess and a wilderness and that God wanted to baptize chaos in the waters of creation. Although Genesis was written around the sixth century BCE, and was addressed to a despairing people, exiled in Babylon, the story of creation also communicated to the first-century Jews that God, who was in the middle of the creation of the world and could make something good out of chaos, that God would also join them, right in the middle of their persecution.

That is why I think baptism is important. Baptism is important because we need a hovering peace. We need the wind of the spirit to rip open the heavens and call us by name. We need God to be with us when we are in the wilderness. We need to know we are beloved. And that is what happened with Jesus. Jesus's baptism was that dividing point between the old and the new, between the old covenant and the new covenant. All the people of Jerusalem, all the people in the holiest of Israel's cities came out into the wild and rough wilderness, back to the place from where they once came, to find God and begin a new faith journey. And so do we. We enter the waters of baptism amidst our barren, harsh, and chaotic lives to follow the example of Jesus, to feel the winds of peace, and to hear a voice from heaven tell us that we are beloved, that we are worth it.

Yesterday, Royal Lane hosted the Alliance of Baptists Regional Gathering of chaplains from across Texas. And Amanda and I have some good, longtime friends who came down from Austin to participate in the event. Well, last night we went to this amazing Greek restaurant for dinner and the "opas" and the people dancing to Zorba got me thinking about my sermon today and about baptism. Do you remember the movie *My Big, Fat, Greek Wedding*? Amanda and I watched it at least a dozen times when it first came out. In the film, Toula, an ordinary, yet quirky girl from a big Greek family, fell in love with a man, Ian, who was not Greek. At first, her father Gus wouldn't allow his daughter to marry a non-Greek. Eventually, Gus finally decided that he would allow Ian to marry Toula if he was baptized in the Greek Orthodox Church.

So, Ian was then baptized in the manner of the Greek Orthodox church, being immersed three times, once in the name of the Father, then in the name of the Son, and finally in the name of the

Holy Spirit. As this was happening, Toula and her brother Nick were talking. Toula's brother turned to her and said, "It's not so bad, huh?" Toula, who had quite a few self-esteem issues, replied in horror, "Are you kidding? Any minute now he's going to look at me and go, 'Yeah, right. You're so not worth this.'" And Nick lovingly responded, "Yes, you are."

And that's exactly what God says to us, not only on the day we are baptized, but every time we practice our baptisms and live out our baptisms in the world. God peers through the heavens and says, "You're so worth it." The voices that we hear when baptism is celebrated remind us that we are worthy and that we are loved. The voices that tell us we are beloved have been spoken at solemn christenings in the highest and holiest cathedrals in the world, and were whispered at secretive services in the hidden yet faithful churches of ancient Rome. The voices that tell us we are beloved have been spoken on the craggy soil of riverbanks and beside sterile hospital beds. The voices that tell us we are beloved have been spoken next to tiny bowls of water, in backyard swimming pools, and beside the mighty, roaring oceans. The voices that tell us we are beloved have been spoken in the deserted wilderness surrounded by angels and beasts, and in the wilderness of our busy lives today when we are suffocated by meanness, exhaustion, fear, and pain. The voices that tell us we are beloved are crucial as we find peace in the midst of the chaotic wilderness and as we practice our baptisms each and every day.

That is why baptism matters. Baptism matters because we remember the voices that call us beloved. Just as Jesus heard God's affirmation and love at his baptism, than at his transfiguration on the mountain, and at his death on the cross, we too find the love of God and of our church holding us in our times of change and times of death. And if we practice our baptisms and remember our baptisms, as we travel our wilderness lives, we can remember that we are who God says we are, regardless of what anyone else may say about us. We can remember that we are who God says we are, regardless of our pasts. We can remember that we are who God says we are, regardless of our mistakes and our missteps. We can remember that we are who God says we are, regardless of our gender identity, our sexual orientation, our nationality, our race. We can remember that we are who God says we are, regardless of our camel skin clothing or diet of bugs and honey. Our baptismal voices remind us that our true identity is not what we may choose for ourselves or what others may assign to us, but what God has chosen about us, what God has declared over us, that we are children of a new covenant and a new promise and a new life. That is why baptism matters.

As we remember our baptisms today, know that we are followers of the one who came out of the wilderness, went down to the river, and looked up and communed with a God who couldn't help but rip open the heavens and unleash the spirit of peace upon us. And that spirit is the same spirit that ushered Jesus deeper into the wilderness to be tempted and then to a ministry of obedience, justice, healing, and love. If we understand Jesus's baptism as the beginning of his earthly work and earthly ministry, then we, in following Jesus, have work to do too. Not only do we receive the affirmation of God's incredible and unconditional love saying "we are worth it," we are also beckoned to leave the wildernesses of our lives and go into the neighborhoods and cities, to provide sacrificial service, to speak words that set people free, and to offer healing acts of mercy in the name of Jesus Christ. We are called this day, and every day, to live out our faith in a wandering wilderness, knowing that we are the beloveds of God. "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Go, and practice your baptism.