

# To Be Baptized

## Mark 1:4-11

A preacher in one congregation preached constantly on water baptism. The people were tired of it. The elders and deacons suggested he preach on something else. He said, “Okay, give the text and I’ll preach on it.” They gave him Genesis 1:1.

The next Sunday he said, “By request the text today is Genesis 1:1.” He read it and then said, “When the Lord created the earth, He made it one-fourth land and three-fourths water, and that brings me back to the subject of water baptism.”

Our scripture is a reminder that the gospel is down to earth, grounded in the real, tactile, sensual, fleshy world. In these few verses are references to river water, clothing from camels, diet from bugs, and tying shoes, a bird analogy, and an interesting weather phenomenon. Mark's earthiness gives us a hedge against faith and worship that are too otherworldly or abstract.

We may ask how the dove descended. Gently, if classic pictures of this scene are to be believed. But birds sometimes dive-bomb (for example, to protect their young)! A dive-bombing Holy Spirit would fit with the accompanying "torn apart" sky. Many of us love to sing "Sweet, Sweet Spirit," perhaps preferring the "sweet heavenly Dove" to the wild-wind/fierce-flame Spirit. Are our baptism rituals sometimes so nice that we neglect to mention the uncomfortable implications of inviting God's Spirit to invade our lives?

The earthiness and the Spirit go together. Spirit is the real substance of God acting in creation and redemption and final reconciliation. And yet Spirit is always tied to material—real water, real bread, inexpensive wine, or soaking wet baptismal robes. Spirit fills us in church and then drives us from church (as it drove

Jesus from the Jordan to the wilderness). There, outside the walls, we wrestle with the beasts and pray for ministering angels.

Our text describes John's baptism as a ritual of confession, repentance, and forgiveness. It suggests that everyone in that time (v. 5), whether they were sophisticates from the big city or bumpkins from the Judean countryside, knew that confession was and is good for the soul.

And here we receive a reminder of the value of communal ritual action: the laying on of hands and the feel of water make it all real. Baptism should be a powerful and memorable experience for participants and observers. Linda Holloway tells of the excitement and joyful expression of her grandfather as she came up out of the baptismal waters (ask her about the details). There is a tangible sense of love and blessing when congregations lay hands on people who are moving away, who are going on a mission trip, who are facing major surgery, who are preparing for a special ministry, who are being baptized and received into membership.

John baptized with water, but he declared that Jesus had the authority to baptize with the Holy Spirit. In the chapters that follow, we see Jesus act out that authority—the authority to teach, the authority to heal and cast out demons, the authority to heal. Jesus' authority and Jesus' humility went together. Jesus' authority was and is the authority of the humble one, and his humility was and is the (true) humility of the one to whom all authority belongs. Of course our churches are not simply communal versions of Christ or hand-me-down remnants of his faithfulness. We too want to balance the authority that can unashamedly claim that Jesus Christ is Lord and the humility that knows that he is Lord of all creation, and not just the church's Lord. Our Lord, but not our Lord alone. In worship we claim to forgive one another's sins, we show forth the tension between authority and humility. The sins we forgive in Christ's name are really forgiven.

But they are forgiven in Christ's name, and we are only servants of his own majesty. Christian care listens humbly to the needs and wishes of the other. But Christian care is also given the authority to proclaim—to announce reconciliation, to require fidelity, to demand justice.

When John the baptizer testified that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit, he was declaring what all of Mark's Gospel declares: that the ministry of Jesus was the beginning of the reign of God. The Spirit that is the sign of the turning of the ages was poured forth on Jesus. From then on, he and those who follow him are blessed and given a mission: to declare and embody God's reign.

We want to domesticate the gospel and hallow the present. Mark's Gospel calls us to unfamiliar territory and challenges us with the promise of the future. We are to always be moving forward, following our Lord.

*The New Oxford Annotated Bible* points out that "Jesus himself is baptized into the renewal movement that began before him." This reminds us that in Jesus, Christ did a new thing, but not a brand-new thing. Israel, Torah, the prophets, John the baptizer all prepare the way. God did not wake up one morning and decide that all divine activity up until that moment had been in vain. Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Miriam, King David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, John the baptizer all "prepared the way." We, as baptized believers need to remember that we are in a long line of witnesses – we are not the first, and nor will be the last.

Credit the hugely successful baptizer for recognizing that his innovative ministry was not the be-all and end-all of faith expressions. Credit Mark's Gospel for knowing that not even Jesus is contained by the movements established in his name: he is always "going ahead of[us]" (Mark 16:7). **Elton W. Brown**

Mark's story of Jesus' baptism provides the indispensable context for understanding everything subsequently recounted about Jesus' ministry and passion. God's dramatic acknowledgment of Jesus makes it clear that through the

words and deeds of Jesus we humans are encountering the enacted intentions of God. Jesus is the pivot point of God's dealings with humanity. John links Jesus to God's promises in Israel's past. The setting in the wilderness evokes memories of the preparation of the people of Israel for entrance into the Promised Land. John, the epitome of the prophets, also points forward to God's imminent intervention in human history to confer a new hope to humanity. Into the wilderness of our own broken lives and our own bleeding world erupts the promise of a baptism of new life. Poised like John's generation between a troubled past and an unprecedented future, our proper response in the present should be confession, repentance, and hopeful expectation. **Lee Barrett**

Though Christian baptism has a significance different from that of John's baptism, we have the opportunity to reflect on the significance of our own baptism. The words spoken by the voice from the heavens identify Jesus as God's "beloved Son" (Mark 1:11). The rest of the Gospel describes how this beloved Son fulfilled the mission given to him by God—a mission that resulted in his execution. Christian baptism has transformed us into God's beloved children. Will we commit ourselves to completing Christ's work on earth despite the cost? **Leslie J. Hoppe**

Remember your baptism and remember your mission!

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.