

A Reading from the Gospel of Mark

Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than me is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

If you've ever stood by a healthy stream or river, you probably noticed that the shallow water along the shore is pretty clear, but as it gets deeper, it gets cloudy and you can't see the bottom; in some places, river water is constantly brown with silt and mud. Muddy water from a healthy stream is full of stuff like little bugs and pieces of algae and maybe even water plants. And if you're not afraid of its temperature, and you shed your shoes to test it out, it feels good to walk into it – you feel connected to the movement of the water, to the earth, to life forces living in it.

Since rivers aren't usually stagnant, there's always something floating around in it – if you live near a city that doesn't monitor such things, I'm sorry to say that there may even be yucky stuff like rusty cans, plastic bags and who knows what else floating around in it. Stepping into such a river feels very different; there's a thickness that seems unnatural, and you are surrounded by life-fragments that don't feel so pure and safe.

If you take the chance to wade in this muddy water, you might feel that you are standing in the muck of society – the dregs, detritus and dirt left behind by inconsiderate and careless humans. You might feel like you need to go home to take a shower!

Rivers are wonderful metaphors for life, and in our reading today, the river Jordan is the setting for a major event in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

In the days of Jesus, water was a treasure and probably treated with more respect – it was the very essence of life, necessary for drinking and watering crops for food. There were lots of major bodies of water, but our star for today, the Jordan River, runs 156 miles - the length of the lands of Judea and Israel – and it includes several tributaries and lakes. Crossing it literally takes a person into the Promised Land of God.

We can't know what the water was like the day Jesus took a few minutes to make time for his baptism, but we do know who was there and according to Mark's version of the story, John the Baptizer did the deed, dirty water or not.

We also know that it's very possible there were other people standing by, ready to admit their sins and take a dip in the baptism pool themselves. Because of the popularity of John's ministry, Jesus probably wasn't the only person there...he had an audience.

Up to now, Jesus' life is a fuzzy mystery though as we heard last week, he lived a normal childhood with his parents and grew to be a good man, but the Baptism of Jesus is high on the list of events that have significance in his life as told in the Bible, and it draws attention because it seems to be the starting point of his ministry. In this one act, John prepares the way and God cements it with a strong declaration of love and pride when it's all over.

Mark's version of the story is gritty, earthy and sparse, and in it we get a little background about John that we've heard before (wardrobe, food, lifestyle in the desert), and we also are given few details about the people who came to admit their sins and be baptized.

Then when it's all over and Jesus leaves the river, there's the splitting of the heavens, a Spiritual descending dove and the Voice of God giving blessing to the Son, but we know little else besides this.

Scholars who dig into the Gospels and make comparisons between them bring up a few key points when they analyze Jesus' baptism according to Mark – and there are some interesting questions and possible answers from their discussions that pop up as a result. Here are a few for our consideration:

Question: If sinners from all over Judea were coming to confess their sins and be baptized, why weren't they also being forgiven?

Answer: John only advertised baptism for repentance, for turning your life around, not for forgiveness. Forgiveness was Jesus' job...John was preparing them for what Jesus would do.

Question: Why was John out in the middle of nowhere? If he was doing some type of ministry for the people (and according to Mark, EVERYONE went to him!), how come he was out there all alone, far from the city?

Answer: John wasn't welcome to the Temple area because of his beliefs, proclamations and presentation of his faith as he saw it – he was recognized as a trouble-maker. John was a rebel in the faith proclaiming near-blasphemy; he wasn't an official priest, and his work stirred the people up – something Jesus himself eventually did. To do his work, he needed to be far from city walls...

Question: If Jesus had no sin, why was he being baptized by someone who wasn't as important as he was?

Answer: Some say Jesus was a disciple of John the Baptizer; from him, Jesus learned some of the "tricks of the trade" with being a religious rabble-rouser. Others say Jesus wanted to be seen as "being one" with the people he would eventually serve, and this was an act of solidarity to get their attention. Jesus purposefully sought out John to perform this act of accepting his call to serve God. By doing this, Jesus stepped up his visibility and he joined ranks with the likes of John who were not acceptable by Temple standards. With this one act, Jesus became a threat to the established church.

Question: We already have recognized Jesus as the Son of God by celebrating the coming of the Messiah at Christmas – why does he need to be officially "adopted" by God now with this baptism?

Answer: When Jesus stepped up to be baptized by John, he also stepped into participation in a renewal movement that was a continuation of what was started thousands of years ago with Isaiah and the other prophets. A public, visible act blessed by God offered the "seal of approval" Jesus needed to go from a private life of introspective faith to a very public ministry which would change the world.

From these discussion points alone, we can see that when Jesus took a few minutes to wade in the River Jordan, he stepped into his destiny – and as he exited those muddy waters, he would go from this event to the desert where he would be tempted and tested by evil powers of Satan. Jesus' fate was sealed, but he knew God blessed him and his work so he could move on. As God's messenger of forgiveness and absolute love, Jesus accepted it all as John immersed him into that river; after that, he would be a marked man – the leader of a new way to know and love God.

As we begin a new year - as we wander in and out of our own muddy waters - as we stand together, a baptized people of faith in service to a God who loves us, let's consider a few parting thoughts from Kate Huey of the UCC Worship Ways.

"Couldn't we say, then, that every baptism reminds us that we in the church are part of an ancient renewal movement? It's not easy being part of a renewal movement, as Jesus discovered out there in the wilderness, right after his baptism, when he experienced multiple temptations to his faithfulness to his call and his sense of who he was. Jesus knows what we experience, and that must be why he waded down into the water and wandered in the wilderness. What will help us remain faithful to our own call? ... to remember our baptisms, not as a sentimental journey or an effort to recapture lost enthusiasm, but (as a means) to seek equilibrium on a storm-tossed sea, to get our bearings, to remember who (and whose) we are."

Let's follow Jesus in and out of those muddy waters...amen.