

First Presbyterian Church
January 13, 2013
Rev. Pen Peery

Revealed

Mark 1:1-11

Baptism of the Lord (January 13, 2013)

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight" '

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 I 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.'

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In my life I have had the good fortune of being able to travel. One of my favorite places in the world is Florence, Italy. In the middle of Florence sits the Battistero di San Giovanni –

the Baptistery of St. John. The baptistery is known for its gilded bronze doors that tell the story of John the Baptist's ministry. The doors were added to the Baptistery in 1452 by Lorenzo Ghiberti. Michelangelo thought so much of the doors that he dubbed them "The Gates of Paradise."

The Baptistery is a magnificent structure with a dome. It was built more than 900 years ago. Until the end of the 19th century, every Roman Catholic from Florence was baptized through those doors and under that dome.

Like our baptismal font, the Baptistery has eight sides – representing the six days of creation, the day of Sabbath, and the eighth day of re-creation. For Christians, this "eighth day" has important symbolism – it is the first day of the rest of your life once you are baptized into Christ's death and resurrection.

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On the day that Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan, the dome was the sky above the river and the Gates of Paradise were not just opened – they were torn apart.

We don't know, exactly, why Jesus was baptized. John's purpose in baptizing the crowds was to cleanse them; to wash them of sin. Baptism was tied to repentance. But for Jesus – the motivation must have been something else. Perhaps it was to demonstrate his complete commitment to experience the fullness of human life. Perhaps Jesus crawled down in the muddy bank of the river to identify with those he came to save. The truth is, we don't know why.

What Mark has the goal of telling us is what happened at Jesus' baptism.

In Jesus' time, the heavens were thought to be a kind of buffer between the world and God. Conventional wisdom held that this was a good thing. The God who created the heavens and the earth was not the domesticated, cuddly deity that we often mistake God to be. Being in the presence of God was dangerous. In the time of Jesus' ministry the only place on earth where God's presence was thought to reside was in the Holy of Holies – a room within the Temple that was the home of the Ark of the Covenant, which contained the Ten Commandments given directly from God to Moses at Mount Sinai¹.

Only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, one of the priests of the Temple would venture into the Holy of Holies to offer a sacrifice to God. Before Jesus arrived on the scene, this was as close as human beings got to God's presence. Outside of the Holy of the Holies, the heavens served to separate God from the people.

But all of that changed at Jesus' baptism.

¹ With thanks to The Rev. Dr. Brian Blount (*Preaching Mark in Two Voices*)

Unlike the gospels of Luke or Matthew, when Mark tells the story of Jesus' life he doesn't have shepherds, or angels, or wise men, or Mary, or swaddling clothes. The way Mark introduces us to Jesus is by his baptism.

And what happens at Jesus' baptism is that the time for separation between God and the people of God begins to come to an end. When Jesus came up out of the water of the Jordan, the scripture says, the heavens did not simply open...they were torn apart. The Spirit descended. God's voice rang out. The world is changed.

Throughout Jesus' life, the heavens continued to tear. Every time Jesus touched the unclean, every time he broke bread with sinners, every time he consorted with the tax collectors, every time he offered forgiveness to the undeserving – the space between heaven and earth ripped a little wider and the separation between God and the people of God was diminished. And at the end of Mark's gospel...after Jesus is strung up like a criminal for loving the world too much...after Jesus takes his final breath from the cross...it is complete. Mark tells us that at Jesus' death, the curtain that separates the Holy of Holies from the people is torn in two. The distance between us and God is gone.

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When Jesus is baptized, you would think it would be an event that would be hard to miss – the sky tearing apart, the Spirit descending, God's voice booming...the world changing. But, if you pay attention, no one else gathered at the banks of the Jordan seems to notice. For the crowds, it is life as usual – they have no concept of the earth-shattering, heaven-rending event that has just taken place.

(A little later) this morning our community of faith will gather with the family of Jennings Hyder around the baptism font to celebrate a new member of God's family. At baptisms we typically gather in our Sunday-best, many times with a baby who has their gown carefully selected and ironed; we call the children to come forward and we listen as promises are made. We watch as the water is poured. We witness a new person being claimed by God's covenant of grace.

Yet, I believe, we often think of our baptism in the same, domesticated way that we think of God. In truth, what happens at our baptism is every bit as radical, and dangerous, and dramatic as what happened when Jesus was baptized.

For our baptism is not a static thing. When we are baptized, we are not only celebrating the fact that we have been saved. In our baptism we also celebrate the fact that we have been grafted into the life and body and ministry of Christ.

By our baptism we are made a part of the way that God enters into the world to break down the places that separate the creator from the creation. By our baptism, our hands become Christ's hands. Our feet become Christ's feet. As baptized believers, God uses us...leans on us...expects much from us...because – collectively, as the church – we are the face of Christ to the world.

That space that used to exist between God and the people of God? That boundary between heaven and earth? That curtain between the Holy and the unholy?

Jesus stepped into that space and abolished it...tore it into pieces. Rendered it useless. Filled it with his body, so that the world might know God's grace and presence. And that the world might believe.

In case you missed it, the church is that body. You are that body.

In a (couple of hours/few minutes) our church will ordain and install officers – leaders who have been called to serve this congregation with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. Any kind of service to the church or the world is an extension of what it means to be baptized. Being ordained or installed as an elder or a deacon is another way to say yes to the charge to be Christ's body in the world.

Often, in my work as a pastor, when I approach people with a call to service in the church the first response is one of incredulity. People can't imagine that they are qualified to serve. They worry that they don't have all the answers – or, worse, that they have too many questions about their faith. What I tell them is that every person (including their pastors) worries about those things.

Yet the fact is – Christ has no other body in the world save the church.

So it doesn't matter if you don't feel adequate to the task of being Christ's body.

It doesn't matter if you don't fully understand what it means to be Christ's body.

It doesn't matter if you carry the measure of your faith with an equal measure of doubt.

God not only uses us – in all of our imperfections – but God depends on us to be about the business of the reconciliation of the world.

That is what happens when we gather around this eight-sided font – God adds one more, precious, beloved person to the work-force of the kingdom.

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Through your baptism, God has drafted you into the continuing story of creation.

In your life, God has given you gifts to share for the upbuilding of Christ's body.

Our challenge, this day and every day, is to take our baptisms seriously enough so that the world around us will know the love that God has for us all.

A love without boundaries and without separation.

A love that God has given to us to share.

Let us pray: By your Spirit, Lord, help us to embrace the promise of our baptism – that our lives may point to your grace and truth. In Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.