

Jesus' Baptism – Our Response

Today we begin focusing in earnest on the Gospel of Mark, and for the remainder of the church year. This Gospel, argues Ched Myers, is a “manifesto for radical discipleship.” (11) It comes from an early Christian community for use in its “war of myths with the dominant social order and its political adversaries.” (31) As to the abiding authority of the Gospel of Mark, as with the authority of any scripture for us Christ-believers, it is authoritative only insofar as it leads us to repentance and deeper behavioral allegiance to Jesus. (9, 11)

That being said, I confess to a certain disquiet in having agreed to preach today. What am I to say about this first text in Mark's Gospel, which we've already heard, that will somehow inspire you—and me—to live a more urgently surrendered life of discipleship to Jesus? Or did just hearing it read already do that for you—as it may have for some of Mark's first readers? But probably not. We've read this story before; we know it already. It doesn't strike us as new or newly compelling. How is this story going to touch us?

I have here two pictures—paintings—from Africa, that represent events in this text; perhaps they will prompt some new awareness. I'll pass them around for you to look at, while we continue our reflection.

Supposing we see how well we really do know this story. Would someone like to retell it in your own words—without looking at the text? How about we try to pay attention to details as we go? How does the story go, its first words and sentences?

- **(vs.1)** “the beginning of the good news” – this is another “beginning”, (parallel to Gen.1:1) of what?
- **(vs.1)** “gospel” (good news) – from Roman political propaganda, celebrating military victory, Caesar as divine man, etc.; Mark's is a competing gospel.
- **(vss.1-2)** prophecy – conflation of Ex.23:20, Mal. 3:1, Is.40:3; a new “way” of God, moving/coming; a return from exile?
- **(vss.3,4,5)** “wilderness” – Mal. 3:1 says Lord will come to “temple”; not so Mark's quote, but rather to the wilderness; inverting center and

periphery: not the nations going up to Jerusalem, but all of Judea and all of Jerusalem going out to the “margins”.

- (vs.4) repentance and forgiveness – atonement, sacrifice, all mechanisms of redemption belong to the temple establishment, but now happening in a “river revival”.
- (vs.5) Jordan river – site of Israel’s crossing into promised land; those baptized in Jordan by John—a renewed Israel?
- (vs.6) camel’s hair, leather, locusts and honey – invokes the great prophet Elijah, who pronounced judgement on Israel’s violation of covenant and fomented rebellion against house of Ahab; Malachi (4:5) warns of Elijah coming before the “great and terrifying day of the Lord.”
- (vss.7-8) “one stronger than I” and “he will baptize with the Holy Spirit” – only later in the Gospel do these references emerge as symbols of conflict with the “powers” (of darkness) – see parable in 3:23f.
- **So, from vss. 1-8**, Mark proclaims something profoundly new has happened through Jesus, something antagonistic and subversive in relation to both Rome and the Jewish establishment, and a foreshadowing of something of going on in the “spiritual realm”.

- (vs.9) Then, introduced anticlimactically, comes Jesus, “from Nazareth (obscure, “Nowheresville”) of Galilee” (remote, poor, mixed race, far from Jewish hub) and is baptized.
- (vss.10-11) Now, *apocalyptic (revealing hidden reality)*: “heaven splitting open” – Is. 64:1; Spirit’s descent—Yahweh’s return/“more” incarnation? A voice from heaven: “beloved son” – a king over against ‘rulers of the earth’ (Ps.2:2,7) and a suffering servant, bringing justice to nations (Is.42:1); only Jesus saw & heard this, but Mark lets his readers glimpse behind the scenes. Then (1:12-13), Jesus goes deeper into the wilderness to engage the ruler of the world order in apocalyptic combat!
- **Mark has portrayed Jesus as the obscure, puzzling, but God-ordained, subversive agent of some decisive new coming of Yahweh into the human realm, specifically 1st c. Palestine.**

Now are we inspired by this text? Have we been touched yet by this story of Mark’s? If not, that’s ok. And yet, it is the purpose of scripture to “touch” us, to affect us, to change us, isn’t it? Not just to inform us, or “sanctify” us, but to inspire, comfort, and embolden us. Mark’s purpose in writing this “good news”, this gospel, was to call folks into baptism with the

Holy Spirit, which meant a yearning and empowering to be a “radical” disciple of Jesus.

OK, so, let’s say, we’ve already answered that call. But we still need to keep cultivating this capacity to discern, this sensitivity, to what God is doing, and the willingness to respond. One way we do this is through the reading and study of Scripture, where we encounter testimony that God has been *active*, so we can test and develop our own sensitivity by engaging those texts. Of course we shouldn’t be discouraged if not every scrap of scripture inspires us—it takes work, practice and persistence.

But of course, our goal is to learn how to discern the presence and work of God in real-life interactions, our encounters with issues and ideas, with forces and powers, with nature and mystery, and especially with other persons, other communities, other cultures. How do we know what God is doing and what God is calling us to, as disciples of Jesus?

- Through immersion in scripture, as we’ve already noted.
- Through earnest conversation with like-committed people.
- But also in risk-taking behavior, allowing ourselves to be anxious, perhaps vulnerable, in situations where we only “imagine” that God “might” be active.

John the baptizer, living marginally in a wasteland, and Jesus from “Nowheresville” in Galilee, invited folks to join their fringe movement. Some did, only to be disappointed. Others did, and stayed—for a while. If not actually dangerous, it was at least uncomfortable. Mark testifies that nonetheless, it was there, in those marginal places and people that God was present and active.

I want to share a very simple, personal experience of sensing the presence and work of God.

I have a nephew (in-law) with whom I’ve not had a very close relationship over the years, a man whom I’ve tended to regard as overly talkative and tedious, even though friendly and congenial. We share some basic religious convictions and values, but not a lot of common interests, nor political views, nor cross-cultural commitments. When we’re together, he talks, and I listen—or not—to his experiences of amazing purchases and sales of gold

rings, cut glass, Stetson hats, oil lamps, stamps, an occasional vehicle, and many other objects too numerous to mention. His house is a virtual flea-market. In his late 50's he's been on disability for many years for a walking problem, though he gets around amazingly well, with braces, crutches, or a motorized chair. His name is James. If it's not obvious, I'll be candid: I have been condescending and dismissive toward James.

Last week Gretchen, Mary and I drove to Tenn. to participate in the wedding of Becky (Mary's sister) and James' daughter, a young woman who is also somewhat disabled, with mild autism. The wedding was very small, and the groom shared some of the same liabilities as the bride, which made the ceremony a little delicate and unpredictable. The Lutheran pastor, however, was wonderfully present, reassuring, flexible, cheerful; with no condescension, he embraced an imperfect situation and fragile people and ushered them, really all of us, into the blessing of God, and God's people.

Something happened for me. In the course of some 24 hours in the company of James and his family, I began to see things differently. I began to note the remarkable resourcefulness and hospitality of James and Becky; they invited a family of 6 to share their crowded house for 4 days while preparing for the wedding. I began to see a compassion and resilience that is striking; they've invited the new young couple to live with them in their house, knowing that will bring unexpected difficulties.

With this, I am simply giving testimony to what seems to me the stirring of God where I did not expect it. Unprepared, I was invited to do what I sometimes think I'm a little bit good at—crossing class and cultural margins, and abandoning privilege. But in fact, I was being shown my ineptness and my blindness. And then I was being awakened to the gentle work of God in the unpretentious circumstances around me. Finally, I was being called to acknowledge and, simply by my presence, affirm and join this work of grace.

Unlike Mark's story of Jesus' baptism, my story has no apocalyptic drama, no historical or cosmic import. But then, how many of the folks at the Jordan River that day immediately sensed what was really going on in what they observed and experienced? It's Mark's telling of the story that illuminates its significance, his description of things not seen and not heard by most folks who were there. Seeing and not perceiving, hearing and not

understanding—this is an issue for all who encounter Jesus, and it's an issue for us.

We want to grow in our willingness and capacity to join the work of God that by faith we claim is happening all around us. And yet we are slow to take the risks, to embrace the fears and vulnerabilities that impede our surrender. And so we pray today that God might soften our hearts, that we become susceptible to the descent of God's Spirit that empowers and the Voice that insists: "You, too, are my child whom I love, and my beloved whom I call."

And today, we also claim, in a very particular way, these words addressed to our departed sister, Miriam, beloved daughter of God.

K.K. – FOH – 7 Jan. 2018