

Baptized and Beloved: Mark 1:4-11

What comes to mind when you think of the word ‘baptism’, or the event of baptism? For most of us mainliners, we think of babies (sometimes fussy babies) dressed in white gowns, celebrating with family and special cake, a sprinkling of water. For the vast majority of us, when we think about baptism, we think about a special event celebrated at a special church service. For some of us though, baptism might not mean much at all – it’s just something you are supposed to do for your kids if you were raised in the church. Get the baby done.

Do any of you remember your own baptism? If you were baptized as an infant or a small child, you probably don’t remember much. But perhaps you still have a certificate of your baptism. Perhaps you parents framed your baptismal gown and it’s tucked away somewhere. If you were baptized as a teen or an adult, the event was probably very memorable, signifying your decision to become a faithful disciple of Jesus and a part of a church community. Perhaps you have special pictures to mark the occasion. Perhaps you celebrate your day of baptism as your Christian birthday – when you celebrate your “new birth” into Christ and the community of his body. Or perhaps you haven’t been baptized and you wonder what the big deal is.

I think for most of us, at least within mainline traditions, Mark’s portrayal of baptism really doesn’t resonate with our own experience of baptism. When Mark talks about baptism, he paints a bizarre kind of picture: an eccentric prophet in the wilderness preaching a powerful message of repentance for sins and dunking folks in the Jordan river. No special service in the Temple, no calling up the grandparents to come and celebrate, no baptismal gowns or certificates. And certainly no pictures of a baby getting her head sprinkled with some water by a properly attired religious official.

Mark’s picture of baptism is wild and wet and the heavens are torn apart and the voice of God booms from the heavens and the fiery Spirit of God is present. There is nothing warm and fuzzy about what John is doing in the river Jordan.

And what are we to make of why people were getting baptized in the first place? We all know that baptism is a ritual of cleansing (among other things). It echoes the ancient rite of atonement, of removing the stain of sin so that God and humankind would be reconciled. So, what business did Jesus have in getting baptized? Wasn’t he sinless? Why did he need to be washed clean in the waters of the Jordan? John was calling the people to repentance. Surely Jesus didn’t need to repent of anything, being the eternal Son of God an all.

There are a number of profoundly important theological questions that are raised by Jesus’ baptism. Was this the time that Jesus actually became the beloved Son, and he wasn’t prior to this moment? In that case, is Jesus really God in the flesh? Or perhaps this is the moment when Jesus was commissioned to his kingdom work – sort of the official inauguration of his public ministry? Perhaps Jesus’ baptism didn’t really have any inherent meaning at all, but he did it to be an example for others to follow? And then there is the question of atonement - making right what was wrong, removing sin so that God and his people could enjoy fellowship together, making what was unclean and impure, clean and pure in the presence of God. Perhaps *this* is the moment that Jesus takes on the sin of the world. How does Jesus’ baptism foreshadow his own death when the temple curtain was torn apart?

Fear not! We aren’t going to address all of these questions today. What I want to talk about briefly today is the connection between Jesus’ baptism and being called the “beloved” of God. When

Jesus was baptized in the Jordan, God's voice came from the torn open heavens and pronounced: "you are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mk 1:11). Baptized and beloved. That's where we are going today.

But in order to get there, we need to look at one important aspect of baptism – the atonement part, the death of sin and the new life that arises from that death. Because it is out of that new life that we too are called Beloved.

Baptism is about both death and new life. In the days of the ancient Israelites, there is no new life without death. That is what the entire sacrificial system was based on. Atonement (the removal of sin) was achieved through animal sacrifice. For those of us in the modern age, the concept of animal sacrifice is a little hard to stomach. Not only is animal sacrifice a generally distasteful concept, fraught with issues over the humane treatment of animals, but there is also the sin issue to consider: how does animal slaughter and the subsequent sprinkling of innocent blood all over the place possibly lead to the forgiveness of sins? Well, it goes like this... When the animal is slaughtered, it dies, which indicates that the sin is dead. Then the life of the animal – its blood – is sprinkled around bearing witness to the new life that is gained when sin is covered over and forgiven.

For the Israelites there were two animals for sacrifice on the Day of Atonement. First, a bull was offered as a sacrifice in the temple for the sins of the people. It was have been slaughtered a certain way, certain parts distributed according to the law, a whole lot of blood sprinkled around, and then it was burned on the altar for God. The second animal was a goat. The priest laid hands on the goat, whispered the sins of the people into its ear, and then sent it out into the wilderness thus removing the sin from the people. This is where we get the term scapegoat. The sin of the people is physically removed and right relationship to God and to each other was restored – righteousness was fulfilled.

John was out in the wilderness baptizing – washing people clean from their sins. And into the wilderness Jesus went; to meet the people where they were at, desperately wanting to be made clean and so be welcomed into God's kingdom reign that John proclaimed was just around the corner. It was fitting therefore, that Jesus was baptized there in the wilderness. When Jesus was baptized, he fulfilled this system of atonement, and in himself, made all further sacrifice obsolete. In his baptism, Jesus actually begun the work of putting to death the sin of the people and removing it from them as both sacrifice and scapegoat. Yes, Jesus completed this work on the cross, but it started with his baptism.

Please understand, this event wasn't something that happened in an abstract theological kind of way. That Jesus assumed the fullness of humanity, and in his baptism began healing the fullness of humanity. Cleansing all of humanity in the presence of God was such a cosmos-changing event that the heavens were actually torn apart. Not just opened up, but torn apart! You can see why the Genesis passage of the beginning of creation is read in connection with Jesus' baptism. Just as the Word of God went forth and created order out of chaos and light out of darkness, so the Word of God cleansed the cosmos in baptism, and God the Father tears open the heavens and proclaims his love for the beloved Son. And it was good!

Now, when most of think about baptism, we don't usually think about the heavens being torn open and God claiming us as his beloved. But, hear the words of the gospel: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of

the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:3–4). Baptism and cross go together. Baptism and participating in Jesus’ own life and death go together.

Baptism isn’t something anyone does so that they can be “saved” and ensure that they go to heaven when they die. Our baptism is a baptism into *Christ’s* baptism - into *his* own life and death. *I* don’t get baptized. I share in Christ’s baptism. It is an acknowledgment that Christ has already done once and for all the work of making all of humanity clean and holy and acceptable to God. Which ultimately means that sharing in Christ’s baptism means sharing in his life as the beloved. I told you we’d get here. Baptized and beloved. Just as the heavens were torn open at Jesus’ own baptism, and just as God proclaimed Jesus as the most beloved Son, so too are those words spoken to each one of us at our own baptism – the baptism that we share with Jesus.

Beloved. You are God’s beloved. Have you ever stopped to think about what that means for you? Beloved child of God. Cherished. Adored. Treasured. Valued. Precious. Think about the people in your own life whom you adore, whom you cherish, whom you love with all your heart. Perhaps it is your children or parents or spouse or a special grandparent or relative. Think about what that means to you – that no matter what that person does or doesn’t do, no matter how many mistakes they make, no matter what – you will hold them in your heart as most dearly loved and treasured above all else. Now multiply all of that by an infinitesimal amount, remove any strings you might be secretly holding, and you’ve got how God loves you. God proclaimed his favour on Jesus, his own Son, before Jesus did anything in the world – before anyone liked him, before he healed anyone, before he spoke any words of wisdom, before he fed the poor or welcomed the sick and needy. Before anything, Jesus was beloved. And you in Christ, before you do anything, simply by virtue of the fact that God created you and redeemed you in Christ, are beloved.

We live in a world that is fueled by the insatiable need for affirmation which is often rooted in performance. We live in a world where nobody matters, nobody counts, unless they can prove they are worth something: worth someone’s affection, worth a promotion or a raise, worth the effort, worth the investment. Everybody is a nobody until they can do something that makes them a somebody.

Today, I invite you to hear the voice of God, the same voice that created light in darkness and order out of chaos says to you, “you are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased.” God, in Christ, makes you a somebody. Not because of what you can do or who you are or who likes you on Facebook or whether you are picked for the team or whether you win an award or the quality or quantity of your friends. In Christ, you are a most cherished child of God. Just let yourself sit with that today.