

Belovedness
Mark 1.4-11
January 11, 2015
Epiphany 2
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For the third time in one month, we return to a Gospel text about John the Baptizer. For the second time in one month we return to almost exactly the same text, and we'll pick up today's story again in just a few more weeks during Lent. Lest you think I am either remarkably forgetful or markedly obsessed with John 1 and Mark 1, the creators of the Revised Common Lectionary are the ones guiding back to these texts again and again. Why might that be?

John takes up such a small amount of scripture with practically the same words and actions in each recording, but he sure does come up a lot in worship from late November through January and sometimes again in February or March. John is important to each of the four Gospels writers, so we can trust he was a well-known figure to those following Jesus in the early 1st century. There are extra-biblical accounts of John; the writer Josephus notes him as a priest and prophet. John has disciples who join Jesus only AFTER John's death. His work and presence were significant.

We read the description of camel hair and a belt tied around his waist and the locusts and wild honey; he seems an odd fellow to our modern ears. He stands between the edge of town and the edge of total wilderness, but he does not stand alone. Though he is practicing his faith apart from the mainstream methods of his day, crowds were going to see him. Some of the crowd remained in this in-between place with him in a way similar to the devoted Essenes who also met in the wilderness, at the edge of town, in anticipation of God's movement. People were studying with him, praying with him, preparing with him. This is a community anticipating God's action in the world. John is not alone but is a leader in a movement. And Jesus goes to this man, this well-known leader and proclaimer of God's coming, and he falls in line with the others to be committed to God's Way.¹

Jesus' encounter with John tells the reader just how important Jesus is because the Gospel writers (each increasingly more so than Mark) want us to understand that Jesus is EVEN MORE important than John. John is a proclaimer in line with numerous prophets before him. He has followers, he is trusted, he preaches boldly. And Jesus goes to him to stand in the line of those who have asked and waited for God to act. He steps into the waters to submit to the work of God. The waters wash over him, and he becomes the central player in the Gospel action. Lamar Williamson writes, "The entire story which will follow is above all the story of Jesus and of what God did through him. That is why the baptism of Jesus matters. As a secret epiphany, it tells the reader the true identity of Jesus."²

¹ Some ideas may be prompted by reading Reza Aslan's *Zealot*.

² Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Interpretation: Mark*, p. 35

Mark's account makes sure the readers know they are in on the secret that Mark's version of John doesn't know as the heavens are RIPPED APART, not just opened but RIPPED APART, and the words of God's blessing over Jesus is made only to Jesus and to us:

"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Matthew and Luke put more words on John's lips. Their John is in on the secret. He knows what is happening. By the time we get to John's Gospel, there is no secret at all, and John himself is telling about the dove coming down from heaven.

But in Mark, this is a moment only we readers are privy to, and it is grand. The heavens don't open and close like a window or a door. In Mark, the separation is ripped apart. This is transformation. In Jesus' baptism, the words of belovedness are for all of us. When we follow in Jesus' way, when we step into those same waters, the heavens have been ripped apart for God's blessing to rush to us. Remember this day.

Mark wants us to know that this is a marking moment; a point at which things shift, things begin, things come together perfectly. This is a moment to remember.

On a day of remembering baptisms, I have two. Well, one is remembered for me. As an infant, I was baptized by the Government Street Presbyterian Church in Mobile. I have seen pictures of the white bonnet and long gown. Though I have no memory of that day, it was no doubt a special day for the people who loved the new daughter and granddaughter they were blessing. It was an act of caregiving and provision. They made vows to raise me in the faith and model that way for me. But I myself have no recollection.

By the time I was in third grade, we had left the Presbyterian church and joined my grandparents at the First Baptist Church of Mobile. At some point that year, I was baptized with Kathryn Thompson. We'd "walked the aisle" together after associate pastor Rick Elrod had visited our Sunday School class and talked to us about making a personal decision to follow Jesus followed by a public profession of faith. We met with the pastor, Dr. James Walters, in his study, and prepared for this day with white handkerchiefs in hand. We entered the baptismal waters behind a long, heavy, green curtain before the congregation could see us.

The water was warm and cold at varying levels, and that unevenness had an eerie effect with each step. The warm and cold water was somewhat shocking though not altogether unpleasant. I can't remember much of what happened. I think Kathryn was baptized first. Dr. Walters asked us some simple questions to which the appropriate answer was "yes" or "I do." Then he helped us position the white handkerchief over nose and mouth as he held the other hand high in the air saying, "Buried with Christ in baptism, raised to walk in newness of life." And it was over. We giggled our way back to the large restroom beside the sanctuary with special changing rooms for days such as these. Back in our Sunday dresses but with hair still wet, we returned to the sanctuary where we were allowed to

share in communion for the first time; the little hard tack squares of unleavened bread that were saved for *after* the dip in the water and the “newness of life.”

We were just 8- or 9- years old. Life was still pretty new at that point. But even at that young age, we understood something of following the Way of Jesus as opposed to the way of our own desires, and we knew that way started through the water.

What I did not understand thirty years ago is that baptism isn't an end to a journey, it is a surrendering to a journey. Most of my childhood and adolescence I understood dipping down into those waters to mean salvation from sin and the purification of a dirty soul. At times I was afraid it didn't take. I had friends at another church who were baptized again in high school out of fear that their first baptism “didn't count.” Now I see baptism as the surrender to a path that is unclear, submission to a Way that we feel compelled to follow even if it is not one we would choose. It's winding, it's difficult, God asks us to love people when we'd just rather not. We want predictability, and God loves surprises. We want control, and God delights in challenging those foolish notions.

We enter the waters of baptism and hear that great old hymn, “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love. Here's my heart, Lord, take and seal it. Seal it for thy courts above.” Somehow that act of trust, that act of being covered in ordinary water, it is binding us to the truth of God's blessing. “You are beloved. I'm so pleased with you.”

When I recall my third grade baptism and its lingering effects, I would say there is an undeniability to baptism. As I remember that day, I can't deny God's presence at work in my life. I can't deny that Jesus' Way is enticing and compelling and true. Baptism is the grandest gesture of setting an intention, and it is immediately met with God's words of delight and blessing. In the baptismal waters, these epiphanies wash over us and prepare us for the challenge of living into those truths.

When we return to Mark's text in a few weeks, we'll note the abrupt shift that follows God's blessing. “You are beloved, I am so pleased with you.” And immediately, Jesus was driven out to the wilderness. Before any action on Jesus' part, there is God's blessing. No miracles, no sermons, no disciples. Jesus showed up, entered the waters, and gave himself to God. Then the blessing of belovedness will cover him for everything that is to come; it's bread for the journey and shelter from the storm.

Danielle Shroyer writes, “Baptism gives us travelin' shoes [for the journey ahead]. Then again, there is something that stays in baptism—the indelible mark of beloved-ness. It's the proclamation that beloved-ness has been given to us...and, dare I say, that the power of this beloved-ness allows us to face Evil Incarnate and wild hungry beasts and come out on the other side telling the good news.”

God speaks to Jesus in those waters. The affirmation doesn't come from John or the spectators or his parents or older rabbis. Jesus isn't earning a blessing by being a great orator or healing enough people or collecting a large enough group of disciples. The blessing comes directly from God to Jesus, and it is enough to carry him through the

wilderness that is sure to come. “You are my beloved. I am so pleased with you.” This is a moment of Jesus fully inhabiting his body, his calling, the thin space between earth and heaven. And it is a moment made available to us.

Jesus wasn’t the only one baptized that day. This is part of what John was doing at the edge of the wilderness beside the Jordan River. He’s teaching, he’s praying, he’s baptizing. He is busy out there at the edge of town. Gary Dreier notes: “What is fascinating is that people were flocking to John to hear him name them as sinful. They were traveling miles to him in droves to confess their sin. Pastors are so often afraid to offend or perhaps they just really want to be nice, but what we all hunger for is the truth. John named the truth, and it was cleansing to his audience to have it named and to hear said out loud: “I am a sinner.” Pretending is hard, emotionally taxing work. Truth speaking takes courage but is ultimately liberating.”³

In *Life of the Beloved*, Henri Nouwen gets away from this language of sinner and sinfulness because of the overuse of those words. He says we all think of different things when we talk about sin. Many of us think about teachings on judgment and hell we have either feared, rejected, or felt cast out by. But what John is doing is the *opposite* of casting people out. He’s drawing people together because baptism is a corporate act. He’s making a community of sinners. And so the language Nouwen uses is of our brokenness. John is telling the truth that we are fragile and broken. Life is all too often not what we had hoped it would be. Even worse, we are all too often not the people we had hoped we would be. The parent, the spouse, the coworker, the friend, the daughter, the son, the neighbor—we are our harshest critics when it comes to our failings and shortcomings.

Somehow John shines a light on the truth of brokenness in such a way that people discover they are not alone and they realize that God offers them wholeness. Whatever WAY John is preparing is a way of *shalom*: *God’s comprehensive peace and wholeness* for all people; the kind that makes us flourish. When Jesus walks into those waters—the waters of brokenness and community and Divine plan and shalom—the heavens rip apart with blessing.

Last week we looked at a different John the Baptist passage as we talked about becoming children of God. In that text, John tells his followers that Jesus empowers people to become the children of God. The Way of Jesus is a way of discovering and returning to our truest self. Nouwen also writes about this process of becoming:

“If it is true that we not only are the Beloved, but also have to *become* the Beloved; if it is true that we not only *are* children of God, but also have to *become* children of God; if it is true that we not only *are* brothers and sisters, but also have to *become* brothers and sisters...if all that is true, how then can we get a grip on this process of becoming? If the spiritual life is not simply a way of being, but also a way of becoming, what then is the nature of this becoming?

³ <http://www.goodpreacher.com/shareit/readreviews.php?cat=47>

*Becoming the Beloved means letting the truth of our Belovedness become enfleshed in everything we think, say, or do...As long as "being the Beloved" is little more than a beautiful thought or a lofty idea that hangs above my life to keep me from becoming depressed, nothing really changes...Becoming the Beloved is pulling the truth revealed to me from above down into the ordinariness of what I am, in fact, thinking of, talking about, and doing from hour to hour."*⁴

Those waters touch everything.

In his poem *Melt*, Michael Coffey puts it this way:⁵
"So why, if this same fluid universe
has baptized you already into your belovedness
and puddled you up with everything and everyone
have you not yet let go and melted
you fine thing."

Remember your baptism today, children of God. Walk to the water, dip your hands, and remember. And if you have never waded into those waters before but are ready for that walk, I will be privileged to meet you there.

You are beloved daughters and sons of God. God delights in you. God is pleased with you. God is crazy for you.⁶ Remember this. Let it wash over you. Let go and melt into that truth.

⁴ Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*, pp. 44-46

⁵ <http://mccoffey.blogspot.com/2012/01/melt.html>

⁶ From Nadia Bolz-Weber's sermon on the baptism of Jesus.