

Remember Your Baptism
Don Lincoln
Mark 1: 4-11

“Hello beloved children of God.” That’s who you are. You belong to God; and you are God’s beloved.

Remember that old TV show – “Weakest Link?” That’s **NOT** you. Nor are you known by some silly, demeaning, belittling nickname, no matter how powerful the person who might give it to you. **YOU** are a beloved child of God.

But – I get ahead of myself. **(READ SCRIPTURE)**

Mark’s Gospel starts with Jesus’ baptism. Matthew’s Gospel gives a genealogy of Jesus, an angel talking with Joseph about what’s going to happen with his betrothed, and the visits of wise men. Luke’s Gospel begins with the story we just heard a couple weeks ago – Mary, angels, a manger and shepherds.

But Mark’s Gospel starts with Jesus’ baptism. Mark’s Gospel is the earliest – it’s the briefest, and the most cryptic. Mark uses the word “immediately” 41 times in his Gospel – it’s hurried; impatient – and has a sense of urgency. “Let me tell you what happened!”

Right away, Mark gives us this sense of earthiness, the down to earth-ness of Jesus’ Gospel, grounded in the real, tactile, fleshy world.

In these few verses are references to river water, clothing from camels, diet of bugs, tying shoes, a bird analogy and an interesting weather phenomenon – a break in the clouds. Mark’s earthiness gives us a hedge against faith and worship that are too ethereal, otherworldly and abstract. This is real, earthy stuff.¹ Right from the beginning.

John the Baptist appears – where? In the wilderness. If you know anything about Scripture, you know that wilderness is a puzzling place, a place of sojourn, a place of danger, a place of temptation and judgment. And here we are in the wilderness, with John – the radical, shouting, weirdly-dressed prophet, with the first gluten-free diet (yes, gluten free - honey and locusts!) recorded in Scripture. John in the wilderness – the bridge between the old story and the new beginning.

Mark doesn’t worry about the conversations between Jesus and John at the time of baptism like the other Gospels, i.e. Jesus showing up, and John saying “No, no, I should be baptized by you!” Mark gets right to the point: “Jesus came from Nazareth and was baptized by John in the Jordan.” Short; sweet; no embellishment.

Then suddenly God rips the heavens open, and speaks this amazing word. “Love you! Delighted in you! You’re the best!”

Jesus hasn't even started his work. He hasn't gotten a thing done. You and I expect commendations to follow hard work; recognition belongs at the end of a project or performance – after they have been earned. And yet here is this strange explosion of divine recognition and delight, even before Jesus' ministry begins.²

It's clear Mark wants you and me to know who Jesus is from the beginning. **Beloved** is both a first and final word about Jesus. And if you read the Gospel, you will find that it is the first and final word about us too. God's love for us is neither episodic nor earned; it is a first and final word about who we are and whose we are.

Just as Mark wants us to know who Jesus is from the very beginning, the church wants you to know who you are from the very beginning too.

That's why we baptize. Let me say a word about baptism. This is not a vaccination against demons – it's an immersion into new life – the life of knowing you are loved. And while we can baptize at any age and with any amount of water, we love baptizing babies, because they can't do anything about it. And an affirmation that we are not doing it because of anything they do or don't do, but because of who GOD is.

Baptism for us is not so much about the washing – if it were, there wouldn't be enough water in the Atlantic ocean to take care of us. Baptism is about the claiming and proclaiming. "You are a beloved child of God."

I was responsible for Wednesday chapel this past week – our short, 20 minute service with scripture, silence, song and communion. Pastor Jon Frost caught me on Monday, and told me he had pulled together a liturgy for the baptism of Jesus if I wanted to use it. I said "Great!" and began to look through our new hymnal for a song to go along with the theme.

I ran across a song that I'd sung once – over 30 years ago in someone's ordination service. Take out your hymnals. Turn to page 488. First – let me explain a little bit about the structure of the hymn, because we ARE going to sing it!

If you are not a musician, you may not follow this hymn as it goes. There are three verses listed there, in normal fashion, then look at the second line from bottom. THERE is a fourth verse. Don't sing the 4th verse until you've sung 1, 2, and 3. See the end of the third line from the bottom? The end of the line with the word "dwell"? There are two little dots right after "dwell," and those two little dots mean go back to the beginning. So you go back up to the top, you repeat. So we'll sing verses 1, 2, and 3 first – and THEN verse 4. Anyway, enough instructions!

So I asked a colleague if she knew this song – and she asked me to sing it – and so I did. Or I started to. (singing – *"I was there to hear your borning cry....I'll be there when you are old....."*). I couldn't finish.

This hymn is from God's point of view. It's God talking. Look at the words of the third verse. *"In the middle ages of your life, not too old, no longer young, I'll be there to*

guide you through the night and complete what I have done.” This is God speaking you and to me!! *“When the evening gently closes in and you shut your weary eyes, I’ll be there as I have always been with just one more surprise.”* I still can’t through it without choking up.

Perhaps it’s the fact that I did more funerals last year than any other year in my ministry. And I know there are always more coming. Maybe it’s because of the season of life my own parents are in, which means it’s my season too. But whatever it is, these days I find myself particularly tender and vulnerable.

As I said a few years ago in a sermon – “As I age, I realize I’m growing more and more emotionally incontinent!”

At the end of this service, I won’t be able to sing that hymn. It is to RICH! The overwhelming sense of God’s watchful eye, over every moment of our lives.

I remember an old cartoon I saw once. In it is pictured a preacher, leaning one elbow on the pulpit, hand on his hip, sour look on his face, saying “This is my fourth sermon on the transforming power of the Gospel. Why do you look like the same old bunch?”

Sisters and brothers, remember your baptism. This is a day to bask in love – to shout Hallelujah or weep tears of joy. Because in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, we are made whole, we are claimed as beloved children of God.

Every single one of us longs to hear words of acceptance, identity and love. Which is precisely the gift of Baptism. You and I do not have to do anything to receive God’s promises. In baptism, God says we are enough. Already. That we are pleasing to God and deserve to be loved.³

And whether you know it; or feel it; or sense it – there’s not a day that goes by that God doesn’t know about. Listen to what He says: “I was there to hear your borning cry.” God was there for your first cry. And He will be there for your last cry too.

A colleague of mine tells of a friend who struggled for a long time with a reorientation of her identity after coming to the Christian faith and feeling a call to ministry. Highly successful in her previous work and gifted in many areas, she was also deeply wounded from prior relationships and betrayals. She struggled intensely with questions of love and worthiness even as she prepared for pastoral ministry.

In a moment of exquisite theological insight, she went home one night, grabbed her lipstick and wrote “cherished” across the top of her bathroom mirror. She had finally gotten hold of the truth that could frame her life.⁴

“You are my beloved child.” In this simple phrase, God’s heart is laid bare. Jesus is God’s precious one. And so are you. For God sees everyone baptized as we are seen in and through Jesus Christ – beloved.

So today I want you to remember your baptism. I don't mean remember the event itself. Heck, I found my baptismal certificate – and I was baptized on May 8th, 1955. I was 94 days old; I don't remember much! The remembering I want you to have, is to remember who God is, and what God said. “Love you.” “You delight me!” “You're the best!”

As you leave the sanctuary, you'll find a baptismal font in each aisle. I'll invite you to touch the water – mark your forehead – remember your baptism. **There's even a little Jordan river water in each of those fonts. Perhaps it will remind you that indeed, you are connected to those words God said to Jesus when he stepped into that Jordan river long ago. “You are a beloved child of God.”** Hear God say to you, “Love you.” You're the best!”

AMEN.

1. Elton Brown, Feasting on the Word, Commentary on Mark 1: 4-11; Year B, Vol 1.
2. Christine Pohl, “Power and Delight,” Christian Century; January 10, 2006.
3. David Lose, “In the Meantime.....”; from www.davidlose.com; January 4, 2018.
4. Pohl, op. cit.