

**Remember Your Baptism
Mark 1: 4-11
Don Lincoln**

Matthew's Gospel starts with a 48-name genealogy of Jesus, plus an angel talking with Joseph about what's going to happen with his betrothed, and the visits of wise men we heard about last week. Luke's Gospel begins with the story we heard all around Advent and Christmas – Elizabeth, Mary, angels, shepherds and a manger.

But Mark's Gospel tells none of those stories. Mark's Gospel starts with Jesus' baptism. In case you don't know, Mark's Gospel is the earliest written of the four Gospels – it's the briefest, and the most cryptic. Mark uses the word "immediately" 41 times. Mark's Gospel is hurried; impatient – it has a sense of urgency. "Let me tell you what happened!"

From the beginning, Mark gives us this sense of earthiness – the down to earth-ness – story of Jesus, grounded in the real, tactile world. I've preached on the baptism of the Lord more times than I can remember – but I like Mark's version of the story most of all.

In these few verses are references to river water, clothing made from camels, a diet of bugs, tying shoes, a descending bird analogy and an interesting weather phenomenon – a break in the clouds. As one scholar says, "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 or wandering, a place of temptation, frequently a place of danger.

And here we find ourselves in the wilderness, with John – the radical, probably-yelling-most-of-the-time, weirdly-dressed prophet on the first gluten-free diet recorded in Scripture – honey and locusts! John in the wilderness – the bridge between the old story and the new beginning.

If you know your Gospels, you'll note that Mark doesn't worry about the baptism conversations between Jesus and John as Matthew does. Like John saying "No, no, I should be baptized by you!" And Jesus saying, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." No, Mark gets right to the point: "Jesus came from Nazareth and was baptized by John in the Jordan." That's it. Short; sweet; no embellishment.

But the last part of this text is the part I love the most. Because suddenly God rips the heavens open, and speaks this amazing word – to paraphrase: “Love you! Delighted in you! You’re the best!” “My Son, the Beloved!”

Jesus hasn’t even started his work. He hasn’t gotten one 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

I think Mark starts his Gospel this way because he wants us to know who Jesus is from the beginning. **BELOVED.** 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.

And just as Mark wants us to know who Jesus is from the very beginning, the church wants you and me to know who we are from the very beginning too. That’s why we baptize – as Jesus was that day. And let me say a word about baptism.

Baptism is not a vaccination against demons or some kind of spiritual virus. Baptism is an immersion into new life – the life of knowing, believing, comprehending, and understanding you are loved. And while in the Presbyterian tradition we can baptize at any age and with any amount of water, we love baptizing babies, **because they can’t do anything about it.** We are not baptizing because of anything they do or don’t do, but because of who GOD is and what God has done for them – the God who loves us all.

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

And if you and I know we are loved, with an undeserved love, and delight in that love, and revel in that love, then what should it stir within you and within me? A heart overflowing with love. A heart that becomes a channel for that love; a heart so infected with love it should be more contagious than omicron!

But unfortunately, the church hasn’t always witnessed to that love. We say we love, but when it comes down to it, do we really mean it? Do we really express it? And let’s not talk about the church as if it’s an institution that exists by itself – apart from us – apart from the baptized who are its life, its message, its expression of God’s way of be-loving.

A colleague shared the following story with me about events he witnessed 27 years ago, and what he recounts still speak into the world in which you and I currently live. Listen to this pastor’s story:

Baptizing two children was the last thing I expected to do when I traveled to Northern Ireland in 1995. I went to Belfast to interview church and political leaders about the prospects for peace in that troubled land. A troubled land that after 25 years of warfare between Catholic and Protestant paramilitaries had finally agreed to a fragile cease-fire that had been in place for about a year.

Northern Ireland was still a segregated province, with Catholics and Protestants living and working in rigidly defined communities. There **was peace** – but there was very little harmony.

One evening, Norma McConville, a wonderful Protestant laywoman who worked tirelessly for peace, took me to her daughter-in law's birthday party. At the party I met Sally, a young mother who had brought her nine month-old daughter, Clara, to the party because she could not afford a baby-sitter.

During our conversation Sally told me she was worried about Clara, who was rapidly losing weight. Doctors had been unable to determine what was wrong. What also worried Sally was that Clara had not been baptized.

When I asked why not, Sally said that she was Catholic and her husband Presbyterian, and in their village of Tandragee the animosity was so strong that neither the Catholic priest nor the Presbyterian minister would baptize the child of a "mixed marriage."

I couldn't believe such a thing and impulsively offered to baptize Clara myself. So the next evening I returned to the scene of the birthday party, this time to baptize Clara. There's more. Sally showed up with her next-door neighbor, Debbie, who was holding her three-year-old son, Jonathan. Debbie was Presbyterian. Her husband Catholic. Same priest. Same Presbyterian minister. Same refusal to baptize a child.

And so in that crowded little cottage in Tandragee, surrounded by a few family and friends, Clara and Jonathan were welcomed into the family of faith as beloved children of God. It was one of the most powerful experiences of my life. Might the Catholic and Presbyterian churches of Northern Ireland be mad at me? Probably. Could the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) discipline me? Maybe. I didn't care.

To that little "congregation" in Tandragee, I read from Mark 10: People were bringing their children to Jesus and the disciples were trying to keep them away. Jesus, indignant, says, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."

It's a powerful story. I remember back in the 70's, 80's and 90's, when I heard about the unrest in Northern Ireland – and I remember thinking how awful it was that such hatred could exist between Christians – two branches of the church of Jesus Christ.

But this past week, recalling the events of January 6th a year ago – and remembering the violence and unrest in our land – I am reminded – anger and hatred know no bounds. And – my guess is – a good portion of those on all sides of the division in our country – division in our nation that continues to boil over in hatred and vitriol, wreaking havoc in this land – a good portion of those instigating unrest and spewing such anger – are baptized.

Baptized. Beloved of God. Sisters and brothers in Christ.

I said earlier, baptism is not a vaccination against demons – it's an immersion into new life – the life of knowing you are loved. But perhaps it **SHOULD** do something about the demons.....

As the baptized – washed, cleansed, loved of God – you and I have an obligation – a responsibility – a calling – to share words of acceptance, identity and love. To offer the gift of baptism – belovedness – to others. Not hatred, but invitation to conversation; not violence but discernment about how we can work together for the well-being of all, rather than just for my side, my way, my life.

For it's when you and I realize belovedness – first in ourselves, and then begin to recognize it in those around us – that you and I are equipped to be sent into the world to work for things that help, rather than hurt, things that encourage rather than put down, things that lift up rather than belittle ALL those whom God calls “beloved.”

If these were pre-COVID days, I would've set up bowls of water on pedestals by the doors, instead of the offering boxes.

And I would've suggested as you leave the sanctuary, that you to touch the water – mark your forehead – remember your baptism.

Maybe you should still mark yourself as you leave this space, or if you're online, as you get up following the benediction. Make a sign of the cross on your forehead – whisper to yourself or to someone with you that you are God's beloved – and then go out into the world – equipped by that love – to be a witness to – **and expression of** – that love, in a world that so desperately needs it.

May it be so. 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.