

Scripture Readings:
Genesis 1:1-5
Mark 1:1-11

Radical Blessing

Welcome to the season of Epiphany! In the gospel of Mark we move fast these days. “The infant Jesus, the parade of shepherds, the singing angels, and gift-bearing magi don’t even get a cameo appearance in Mark’s account of the good news. In the twinkling of an eye and the span of a few verses, readers meet Jesus as an adult at the Jordan River ready to be baptized by his cousin, John. Mark, with his sense of urgency, excitement, and immediacy provides a sparse account of this landmark event punctuated by God’s voice sounding, the heavens rending asunder, and the Holy Spirit *ascending on* the newly baptized Son of the Living God.”¹

From Mark’s account it seems everyone is being baptized. But John is very clear that the one to follow him will be more powerful and important. As always happens in Mark immediately Jesus shows up, to be baptized by John. “It’s a pivotal moment, but Mark doesn’t linger long because there’s so much more to tell. No fancy baptismal cake, Hallmark cards, and photo opportunities for Jesus; there’s no time to rest on one’s liturgical laurels. One minute the Son of God is dripping wet and basking in the affirmation of his Father, and the next minute he’s driven into the wilderness by the very same Spirit that just descended on him. We celebrate this event in *Jesus’* life each year during the season of Epiphany, but what connections do we draw between Jesus’ commissioning and his “diving into” ministry head-on and feet forward at the insistence of the Spirit? For many of us the day may serve to remind us of our own baptism, of the day we met water and Word whether or not we realized what was happening. Maybe we made our own promises, or perhaps someone made them on our behalf. Do we see it as a commissioning, as the point in which we are continually called to dive into the deep waters of mission and ministry ourselves? We walk in Jesus’ wet footprints, to be sure, but each one of us is called, named, claimed, and sent.”²

¹ Wet & Well Pleased By Sharron R. Blezard, January 6, 2015 Lectionary Reflection for the Baptism of Jesus January 11, 2015

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“Perhaps baptism is something you only think about when you witness one. It seems fitting to join the lectionary focus of this day being that in the last weeks we have witnessed or experienced 5 baptisms in this church community. For most of us baptism is a ritual that was important to your parents or grandparents and when you have your own children but other than those times we likely don’t give it a whole lot of thought. I chose to be baptized in my teen years and so it is something I remember well, but even I confess I don’t celebrate the day every year.

So lets take a moment to pause and think about baptism. Our baptismal day is the day when we recognize and celebrate God’s promises to us. This is the day when we acknowledge that God blesses chooses and commissions us for an abundant life. David Lose claims “I believe there is perhaps no more important event in our lives than our baptism.”³

Before we go too much further lets acknowledge that I do not believe you are less loved and/or commissioned if you are not baptised. From my perspective whenever baptism is used as an exclusionary tool it is not holding up the true meaning of the event. Baptism is about a public acknowledgement of a blessing we already have from our God. Karoline Lewis writes “I worry when we take a ritual executed in the wilderness, with God’s ripping apart the heavens to get to God’s son, to get to God’s people God loves, and create every possible restriction. As soon as we make baptism legalistic we have domesticated Mark 1:1-11.”

Before I go on to the importance of this day I want share a story by Lewis because we never know when we speak of a ritual like this what we may have been told in our traditions or what legalisms we may hold. Lewis wrote:

A few years ago my husband and I repeated a dialogue sermon in our new church in Minneapolis... That Sunday ...”one of the members approached me after worship. She was 90 at the time. I will call her Hazel. “Karoline,” she said, “is that really true?” “What?” I answered. Hazel responded, “That God baptizes you.” “Yes, it’s true. This is what we believe. Why?” Hazel then told me about her sister who was born several years before she was. Her sister was born very ill, in the home, and never left the house because she was so sick... The family knew she would not live long, she lived about two months as it turned out, and was baptized by her grandmother somewhere in that two month period. When Hazel’s parents went to the pastor of the Lutheran church where they had been lifelong members to

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plan the funeral, the pastor refused to hold the funeral in the sanctuary because he had not baptized the baby. The funeral was held in the basement of the church. Hazel then said to me, “Does this mean my sister is OK? Is she really OK?” “Yes,” I said. “Your sister is OK.” These are the pastoral results of practices for the sake of practices alone. Here was Hazel in front of me, 90 years old, weeping for the sister she never knew, crying tears of relief and grace. This is what happens when we tame God. Like translations do of Mark 1:9. The heavens are not “opened.” There is a perfectly good Greek word for “open” and it’s not there. The heavens are “torn apart,” a passive verb, because God cannot stand the separation any longer. Yet, look at what we do. Create systems and structures that mediate God’s presence. Insist on rituals and formalities to regulate God’s grace. Control the means of God’s love, not for the sake of good order, but for the sake of our own power.”⁴ This is why I will never say “no” to a baptism. I do not believe baptism comes from me - it is an act of God. I think that baptism in the church community is important, and it represents a welcoming and a joining of community - but first and foremost it represents a blessing acceptance by the most holy God. And acceptance is crucial for all humanity.

David Lose continues. “One of things I’m struck by in today’s culture is the omnipresence of affirmation. Facebook gives us the chance to “like” movies or books or posts and to have things we write or post “liked” by our “friends” in return. Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram invite us to collect thousands of “followers,” “fans,” or “friends,” most of whom we’ve never met. Sports programs routinely reward kids just for showing up with medals “for participation.” Ads are increasingly personalized, targeting our particular tastes and creating the impression that we are the most important customer in the world. And so on.

One of the reasons I think digital platforms, and social media in particular, are powerful is precisely because they creatively offer affirmation in plentiful doses. Deep down, of course, we know that this kind of affirmation doesn’t mean all that much. Or at least shouldn’t. Many of the folks we encounter via the web, after all, don’t really know us and we don’t know them, so how can their “likes” or “hearts” create any enduring sense of value or worth? And yet it’s hard not to wonder what was wrong with the picture we posted to Instagram if only twenty people liked it when another picture garnered two hundred nods?” Now even if you are not into social media stick with me. There are so many ways we look for and receive affirmation in today’s world. Perhaps because we also live in a culture that seems to be judgmental of one another before we even give the person a chance.

⁴ Lewis, Karoline workingpreacher.org

“So while this affirmation may be somewhat superficial, it’s at least better than nothing. We crave that recognition and interaction because we are, at heart, inherently social people. Almost every element of our being reflects God’s observation in Genesis that it is not good for us to be alone, and so the affirmation, relentless as it is ubiquitous, social media offers creates the perception that we are linked to so many others – indeed, that we are surrounded by a community of like-minded, and like-able, people that value us. But is it a perception or illusion? Sherry Turkle – MIT professor, internet scholar, and author of *Alone Together* – has discovered that people today report feeling simultaneously more connected and lonelier than ever before.

Why? Because while we may crave affirmation, what we need is acceptance. ... Acceptance, I want to be clear, is not the same as “fitting in.” Indeed, it is its exact opposite. For while fitting in – the skill we learned most keenly in adolescence but keep sharp into adulthood – is all about changing yourself so as to be found acceptable to your peer group, acceptance is simply and crucially being accepted and valued just as you are. And there is nothing more important or necessary in leading a healthy, productive life than feeling accepted.

Which is where baptism comes in. Notice in Mark’s treatment of the story of Jesus’ baptism two things. First, notice God’s words to Jesus. They are personal, poignant, and powerful. “You are my beloved son. With you I am well pleased.” Wrapped in these words of acceptance are the blessings of identity, worth, and unwavering regard.

Second, notice that these words come just before Jesus’ temptation (which we won’t read about until the beginning of Lent) and the start of Jesus’ ministry (which we’ll return to in two weeks). This event – Jesus’ baptism – isn’t incidental to Mark’s story about Jesus, it’s foundational. Indeed, it comes immediately after the introductory verses and so stands as the very first episode of Jesus’ life Mark tells shares with us.”⁵

Jesus’ baptism is the highlight of his life story according to Mark. It is the event that commissions Jesus into life and ministry. Jesus spends a lifetime of ministry giving people the same blessing, as he heals, feeds and welcomes the outcasts, ensuring they know they are beloved children of God.

“And the darkest moment of the story when Jesus feels absolutely abandoned is followed immediately by the story of resurrection, where the messenger testifies that God has kept God’s baptismal promise and continues to accept and honour Jesus as God’s own beloved Son. So also, at our low moments, we might

⁵ Lose

remember that the God who raised Jesus from the dead is the same one who promised in baptism to never abandon us and to love and accept us always and still as beloved children, even and especially when we have a hard time loving and accepting ourselves.”⁶

Baptism offers us the acceptance, of the Creator and thereby empowers us to accept others in turn. Baptism reminds us that wherever we go and whatever we do or have done to us, God continues to love us, accept us.

So let’s celebrate this day, not just as the Sunday of the Baptism of Jesus, but also as the Sunday of Our Baptism and Blessing.

“According to Mark there is nothing tame or complacent or orderly about baptism at all. There are no rules, no ecclesial documents, no constitutions or bylaws. Rather, we are plopped in the middle of the wilderness with ...the heavens ripping apart before our very eyes. I wonder what a baptism service would look like if we actually had Mark in mind. I have a feeling it would be less comfortable, less controlled,...When baptism is a wilderness experience, an unexpected entrance of God, and a little terrifying, well then, we will know the meaning of baptism according to Mark. Because baptism is a blessing like you have never received before and never will receive again. Baptism is the moment when the water of life is poured on your head and the spirit descends with the blessing “You are my beloved in whom I am well please.”

I am going to invite you now to come forward to the font and receive a baptismal blessing as we sing together “I am a child of God.”

Let us pray:

Creating God, you spoke and the universe was illuminated. You uttered a word and all was put into its place. Speak again, Mighty One. Speak light into our darkness. Speak order into our chaos. Bring us up from the depths. Anoint us with your Spirit. Break into our lives and remind us that we are your children, beloved and cherished.

⁶ IBID