

What's Baptism Got To Do With It?

Sermon preached by The Rev. Mary Keenan
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan...and a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

After a week of relentless reminders that our world is fractured by the sins of violence, lawlessness, white supremacy and other forms of extremism, and just plain lies, it feels reassuring to hear the story of Jesus' baptism.

It is a beautiful and comforting image that might remind some of us of baptisms in our own families and in this congregation. A time of prayer and togetherness.

We might well ask on day like today, during a week like this and a in a year like this - what does baptism have to do with it? What does baptism have to do with living in a pandemic and seeing our communities divide and watching the institutions that meant to represent and protect us under assault?

What does baptism have to do with all that?

Baptism is the way Mark introduces us to Jesus, not a manger in Bethlehem, not poetic words about Jesus being the light of the world. All the gospels start the Good News with a kind of Epiphany - a story that reveals who Jesus is. And here in Mark, the Epiphany, the revealing of Jesus' identity, is in the context of baptism - of water and crowds and wilderness and repentance and God saying "You are my Son."

We might have let the story become reassuring in a way it wasn't meant to be - the reassurance of good memories and traditions. BUT Before Jesus enters the scene, there are crowds of people coming to the Jordan to confess their sins and receive a baptism of repentance. Their baptizer is a man clothed in animal skins and eating off the land - he is dressed like a prophet and also like he's at one with the earth.

Rather than reassurance, it would be normal to feel a little put off by this scene.

After Jesus arrives and as he emerges from the muddy Jordan River the heavens are torn apart. This isn't a soft focused watercolor picture, God doesn't just whisper "You are my Son." The heavens are torn apart.

Again, more unsettling than reassuring.

This baptism of repentance in the wilderness and this baptism of Jesus that reveals his identity - this is what Christians have made our rite of initiation into the church, into Christ. What are we getting ourselves into?

Wilderness and crowds of penitents and the heavens being torn open are the context for Jesus' baptism and his identity. So what does baptism then become for us? What is the context for our baptism?

What does Jesus' baptism, what does our baptism mean in the context of today? A time of violent partisanship and pandemic, of anger and fear?

One of the perplexing things about Jesus' baptism is why he's baptized at all. Think about it - John is inviting people to a baptism of repentance. And people come to the river and confess their sins as part of a ritual to acknowledge and turn from those sins.

But Jesus doesn't need to repent, so why is he there? Why is this the event in which his identity is revealed? Not healing or teaching or confronting powerful people...but baptism in a dirty river among people who are repenting of sin.

When this gospel introduces Jesus with an account of his baptism, it is setting up the lens through which we understand his ministry and passion. That is, it is in his baptism that we not only see Jesus as the Son of God, but also as God coming to us, living with us, sharing our humanity the reality of our messy, wild lives in the world. And it is also in this baptism that we can see the Jesus who will die among us and for us.

Jesus doesn't receive baptism to be washed from sin, he receives baptism to join us and all sinners in our sinful world. In Jesus, God comes into our crazy world to be in it with us, no matter how cruel and unjust and out-of-balance it is - even because of how cruel and unjust and out-of-balance.

Jesus' baptism connects him to us, to our wild world, to our personal and corporate sin, to our suffering. That is very reassuring.

If Jesus' baptism is the context in which we can understand his identity, then our baptism is the context in which we can understand our identity. In baptism, we are connected to Jesus. In our baptism and anytime we renew our baptismal vows, we bind ourselves to the ministry and passion of Jesus, to his work of redemption and justice-making and healing.

These are the vows we take in baptism, this is the mission into which we are initiated, what we commit to do with our lives - you can find them in your prayer book:

- I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.
- I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into the dead. On the third Day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.
- I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

- I will - continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers.
- I will - persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever I fall into evil, repent and return to the Lord.
- I will - proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ.
- I will - seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving my neighbor as myself.
- I will - strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.

We will believe, pray, persevere, proclaim, seek, serve, strive. We will continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship. When we do those things, we are living out the connection that Jesus made with us in his baptism and we made with Jesus in our own baptism.

The commitment we make in baptism is active. It is hard work, and yet it is also reassuring because we are not doing that work alone. Many days, it may not feel like these actions make a bit of difference. In Jesus' own day, it might have seemed futile that God came to be with us; the suffering continued and the Son of God himself endured the worst of it in his own body, his own spirit.

And yet...It turns out that baptism and our life of faith have everything to do with the situations we find ourselves in today and this week and this year. Baptism - Jesus' commitment to us and our commitment to live in Jesus - is all about the hard work of living in a pandemic and seeing our communities divide and watching the institutions we rely on under assault.

Joining Jesus' mission has never been about escaping hardship and suffering. Our reassurance doesn't come because we are transported away from a broken world, but because God came to us IN IT. Jesus stands with us IN THIS WORLD.

At a time that feels forsaken, we know that we are not.

Through his baptism, Jesus is connected to us. Through out baptism we are connected to Jesus. That bond is our reassurance.

AMEN