

Rise Up and...
January 11, 2015

Mark 1:4-11

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey. 7 And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." 9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; 11 and a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased."

If you note in your bulletin today we honor the Baptism of Jesus and we turn away from the Gospels we have focused on throughout Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. We turn to the Gospel of Mark. Mark, was the first Gospel written about the life and ministry of Jesus. It was written sometime around 70 AD [CE]. This Gospel begins not with his birth but with his Baptism by John, commonly known as John the Baptist and the introduction into his ministry. From the other gospels we know that John is a relative of Jesus' through his mother Mary and John's mother Elizabeth. It was John who leaped in the womb with joy when Mary greeted Elizabeth and caused Elizabeth to wonder and sing praises about Mary and the favor she had found with God. It was John who Zachariah prophesized would show the way to the coming Messiah.

However, this baptism account is not just found in Mark it is found also in the other synoptic Gospels of Matthew and Luke and also mentioned in the Book of Acts. And although the story of Jesus being baptized is not found in John there are still multiple accounts of John the Baptist denying being the Messiah and pointing the way towards Jesus. It was with this seemingly simple act that Jesus instituted a practice that over two thousand years has grown complex in meaning and diverse in form.¹

In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) we have two ordinances aka sacraments, Baptism and Communion. While initially the church wanted to define these as ordinances, which essentially just means an authoritative direction and can be used by both religious authority and other authority. In the sense of Ecumenicism we have adapted over the years to interchange ordinances with sacraments which differs slightly in how sacraments stand solely for a religious ceremony or act that reflects the inward spiritual understanding and divine grace.

Perhaps in our church denomination, as Protestants, we choose to utilize ordinances over sacraments because we only have two over the seven found in the Catholic church. For curiosity sake as I know some of you are going through mental calisthenics to remember them, these seven are: Baptism, Confirmation or Chrismation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony. We again have only two, Baptism and Communion or the Eucharist.

In our church too, Baptism differs greatly from other protestant denominations in how and why we do it and when we do it. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) believes in what is called "Believer's Baptism." What this means is that while many traditions baptize as infants we in our reading of scripture see that many came to be baptized older as a rite of passage and belief. It is important to know that baptism is not just a 'Christian' practice but the ritual of water as a cleansing rite is used for many faith backgrounds both historically and today.

Jesus was also not baptized as an infant but was dedicated to God and he was baptized as a 30 year old man. Jesus' life and story is why we as Disciples practice infant/child dedication as a call to the parents to raise their children in light of their faith and in the way of Christ. Then around the time of adolescence we believe that youth can make their own

¹ A Handbook for Disciple's Disciples

decisions about their faith and have the choice to be baptized. We often ask that in preparation for Baptism they attend a Baptism, Confirmation, or, as I like to call it, Pastor's Class to learn more about their decision and what it means to them personal in light of following Jesus.

This is also not to say that other forms of baptism are not okay. Baptism can take place in all place and in a variety of different ways. As Disciples we believe in believer's baptism by immersion which means we get dunked but we also accept and even embrace all other forms of Baptism. Because that dunking version is not the only way to be baptized. For some of us we were baptized as infants, where we had water sprinkled or even poured over our heads either once or even in some practices three times representing the Father, Spirit, and Son. Some of us were baptized as youth or even as adults in a church baptistery, or font, others in a pool, a creek, or even the ocean. Essentially you name it, provide water and person willing to do it and a baptism can occur because by virtue of our faith it is GOD doing the baptizing not any one of us who may be honored to do it.

It is God who rips open the sky and baptizes us when we rise up and are made new in our faith. No matter what age we are and how old we are when it happens it is an act of divine grace that cleanses our souls and makes way for the Holy Spirit to wash over us and send us forth into Ministry.

Because that is what happens to Jesus. He rises up and goes forth in mission and in ministry to serve God who has just ripped open the sky to proclaim him beloved. John the Baptist says this is how it happens, though he baptizes with water there is one who comes who will baptize you with the spirit of God. This story is profound in how we can answer the call and upon rising up and stepping out of the water we can go and do and be Jesus Christ in this world.

That is often our goal is it not as people of faith to be Christ like to others and to do the good works that Christ would call us to do? While admirable in the extreme it is also important to note the significance of John the Baptist pointing the way towards Jesus. He was not just trying to imitate or be like Jesus he was saying all I do is because of him and I want you to see, and know him too.

John was not just the first baptizer we hear of but he was also the first evangelist pointing the way towards the Messiah. I think this is perhaps one thing that we gloss over as we read this passage and as we internalize it. We tend to focus on Jesus being the beloved son of God with whom God is well pleased. It is this point that is almost considered the ordination of Christ into his ministry. But I also think it distinctly pushes John and likewise ourselves into a new understanding of our own baptisms.

Yes, we are the beloved children of God, baptized by the spirit and revitalized and renewed when we come to a specific revelation about our faith lives. There is no denying it that by our baptisms we are made new and changed. But the reality is that not all of us can be the Messiah. The reality is that we are not Jesus. We just celebrated the time of his birth and how it impacted our lives but here we stand 2000+ years later and we are still waiting for the Messiah to come again. And that my friends is the point. We are each called to be like John the Baptist, doing what Jesus did, proclaiming the way of the Lord but at the end of the day we have to accept that we are not Jesus, we are each of us John who by virtue of our callings and our faith are called to show others the way towards Christ.