

January 7, 2017

Baptism of the Lord

Mark 1: 4-11

Prayer: Dear Lord, Please go with us into the study of your Scripture. We know that inspiration in reading it is as important as it was in writing it. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Before We've Done Anything At All

Most of you in here know how I feel about ministries or individuals who pop up across the street or in our parking lot, doing the very same things we are doing. When they feed a meal or give out items haphazardly, it actually undermines our work in establishing community and accountability.

But last week *The Greenville News* carried a front-page story about a quite different effort, one that we can get behind. It's an effort by a young woman who's only 20 years old, Adahlia Nix.

Adahlia moved here from Pennsylvania and was working in a thrift store on Woodruff Road. And she soon noticed that every week a homeless woman named Frankie came into the store and bought an outfit.

She could tell that Frankie was no clothes horse. She was shopping each week to replace the dirty clothes on her back. She had no way to wash them.

So Adahlia offered to take her old clothes home and wash them. Frankie tearfully accepted her act of kindness.

A routine developed between the women. Frankie would leave her dirty clothes for Adahlia. Adahlia would wash and fold them and return them to the store with a note that said, “For Frankie.”

Adahlia soon realized that if Frankie needed this service, other people in the community probably did as well. So last summer she started a GoFundMe site to collect money for coin laundry machines and bleach and detergent. She called her project *For Frankie*.

Every Wednesday evening, she sets up at Coin Laundry, just eight blocks up the road, and offers free laundry services for anyone who comes by.

It was a much needed service. It filled a niche. For while we have a laundry room and wash loads of laundry every weekend, we have only 3 or 4 machines. We do one load per person. It’s impossible for us to fill all of a family’s needs.

At Coin Laundry, Adahlia has rows and rows of machines going simultaneously.

Best of all, Adahlia recognizes the importance of building community. She speaks to people by name. She brings puzzles to entertain the children. Two women who were washing clothes started bringing dinner that they share with folks as they wash laundry.

“It’s not like we’re strictly doing laundry,” Adahlia told *The Greenville News*. “We’re hanging out with our neighbors.”

Indeed, I’d go so far as to say Adahlia is loving her neighbor as herself.

I have always found Baptism of the Lord Day a jarring day in the church year. But this year it’s worse than usual.

We've just gotten been through Advent and Christmas. And with the way the dates fell, we didn't even work in Epiphany, which was yesterday.

And then bam!, all of a sudden it's Baptism of the Lord Day. Jesus's childhood has vanished, and he is an adult, starting his public ministry.

So why do I tell Adahlia's story on this jarring Sunday?

Because I think it represents how we live on the other side of baptism.

It represents how we should live after baptism. With extraordinary care and gentleness toward each other.

Please turn with me in your Bibles to **Mark 1: 4-11**, and let's read together these words that can so change our lives.

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I 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. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on

him.¹¹And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

As a newspaper reporter, I was trained to tell a story and stop.

Readers don't have a lot of time, and newspapers don't have a lot of space, so you told your story and you got out.

The gospel writer Mark would have made a good news reporter. That's how he writes. He tells you something once, then he's on to something else.

The gospel writer John would've been edited until he lost his mind. Mark would've fit right into the newsroom.

Our four gospels were all written relatively close together, starting about 40 years after Jesus's death. At some point, the church accepted Matthew, Mark, Luke and John as orthodox Scripture and they became part of what we know as the New Testament.

But all the gospels were not created equal – at least not at first.

For centuries, the gospel of Mark was largely ignored by the church. When you read documents and letters from the early church fathers, you'll find them quoting Matthew most often, then Luke and John, and rarely Mark.

Mark was the red-headed stepchild. Scholars assumed that Mark was simply an abridged version of Matthew. They thought this person named Mark, who was purported to be a follower of Peter, had taken Matthew's gospel and given it a *Reader's Digest* treatment.

But then about the time of the American Civil War, a scholar looked closely at the gospels and decided no, Mark wasn't an abridgement of Matthew. His gospel was more likely the *skeleton* of Matthew.

In all likelihood, Matthew and Luke used Mark as the backbone of their stories, then added material to them. Mark was probably *the first* gospel writer.

Since that realization, Mark has gained considerable respect. Today, almost all New Testament studies begin with Mark.

I personally am a huge fan of Mark's gospel. You know I love Luke for what he says about the poor and the broken, the forgotten and the despised. But I love Mark for the muscular way he writes.

And nowhere is that more apparent than in our Scripture passage today. Mark covers more material in 8 short verses than the other gospel writers do in 8 chapters.

In the Epiphany story that we read in Matthew's gospel and celebrate in our manger scenes, magi from foreign nations recognized Jesus' lordship and came bearing gifts, just as prophecy said they would.

In Mark's baptism story, we have a continuation of the Epiphany. We read about the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus, which is another way of revealing who he is. In this story, only Jesus saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending. Maybe he's the only one who heard the voice from heaven. It's not really clear.

But one thing is clear. We, as readers, are invited into the epiphany. We are invited to see the heavens ripped open and the Spirit's presence. We hear the voice from heaven say, **“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”**

We are invited to see that Jesus is, indeed, revealed as the Christ, whether the other people present see it or not.

And as a result, we are invited into his baptism as well. We are invited to follow Jesus – into baptismal pools or swimming pools or rivers or lakes or oceans, or symbolic baptismal fonts – as a way of committing ourselves to repentance and a new way of life. Of turning around 180 degrees and living a different way.

We used to get a lot of notes in the offering plate, asking why we don't have altar calls. That's what a lot of churches do at the end of every service: They invite people to commit to baptism or to join the church right on the spot.

Believe me, as a lifelong Baptist, I am well acquainted with altar calls. I have attended church camp that wouldn't let us go to bed until somebody responded to “Just As I Am.”

The reason I don't do them at Triune is precisely because I take baptism and church membership seriously. So No. 1, I don't want to emotionally coerce anyone into joining. And No. 2, I don't want anyone joining on a whim because they like what Sammy or Larry sang one morning.

Instead, I invite anyone who wishes to be baptized or join the church through previous baptism to simply come and have a conversation with me. It's painless. We talk about faith. We pray together. I write a letter to your previous church so they can transfer membership, if that's appropriate. We schedule a date.

I want baptism and church membership to mean something, to be something you've thought about.

However you look at it, baptism is a watershed event – in Jesus's life, in our lives. It was so cataclysmic for Jesus that afterward, he went directly into the wilderness.

It should be life-changing for us as well. And part of its power, I think, lies in the words Jesus heard at his baptism.

“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Those are powerful words of affirmation. I imagine that, as a human being, Jesus needed to hear those words as much as any of us do.

We are beloved. We please our creator. What an amazing thing to hear! That is why Larry sang *Amazing Grace* this morning.

You know, our great Christian theologians are all over this baptism. Karl Barth called it the “summary of the essence of the gospel.” The summary of the gospel.

In other words, in this quick and dramatic story of the heavens ripping open and the Holy Spirit descending, God no longer dwells in a distant heaven but right here in Jesus. Right here as a person we can know.

We refer to certain locations as “thin places.” What that means is a place where the distance between heaven and earth has thinned. Where we on earth can feel God’s closeness and presence.

This scene in Mark’s gospel records the ultimate thin place. Heaven and earth are bridged by the Holy Spirit descending onto Jesus. The very heavens rip open and the trinity is revealed with no barriers between them.

And in these words of love and encouragement that we overhear is found the amazing grace that lies at the heart of Christianity: **“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”**

At this point in Jesus’s ministry, he hadn’t done anything. He hadn’t called the disciples or taught or healed or exorcised demons or even made a great batch of wine. And yet he is called beloved. He is called pleasing to his Creator God.

Isn’t that the essence of grace? *We are loved before we do anything at all.*

All you mothers and fathers in here know this feeling. When we hold our newborn for the first time, he or she hasn’t done anything but slide down a birth canal – at excruciating pain to someone in the room. And yet we love that baby fiercely.

When we decide to follow Jesus into these baptismal waters, we are accepting this crazy notion that we are beloved, that we are pleasing to God. And as that other great theologian Paul Tillich wrote, that is the central tenet to our faith. Faith, he said, is “the courage to accept acceptance.”

The courage to accept that we've *already* been accepted. That we are *already* beloved.
That we are *already* pleasing to God.

I imagine that's why Adahlia Nix spends her Wednesday evenings in a coin laundry.

I know that's why we observe communion, to join with our brother Jesus in claiming
our acceptance and love.

Our lives look different on the other side of baptism because we have heard the words
Jesus heard: We are beloved. We are pleasing to God. *Before we've done anything at all.*

Amen.