

“A Fresh Start”

**Rev. Kate Hanch, Children’s Pastor
Holmeswood Baptist Church, KCMO**

The Baptism of the Lord

Mark 4:1-11

January 8, 2012

Genesis 1:1-5, Psalm 29, Acts 19:1-7

Baptism. It reminds us of newness, of transformation, of repentance, of creation. Baptism allows us to have that “Fresh start” we so desperately want and need.

The practice of ritual washing, of baptism, has been around long before Jesus came to the Jordan. In the book of Leviticus in the Old Testament, there are ritual washings that follow the purity laws. In 2 Kings, Naaman immerses himself seven times in the Jordan River to be healed of a skin disease. Some Orthodox Jews practice the *mikvah*, the ritual symbolizing conversion to Judaism. It requires submersion in “living water” such as a spring, but could also include a swimming pool. They have to submerge every part of their body in the water, without clothes, so the water could purify their entire bodies. They spread their fingers out and make sure they get the maximum amount of water on their skin.

Early Christian converts were baptized naked, preferably in cold, running water. Laypersons of the same gender would baptize one another. In fact, when I was looking at art of Jesus’ baptism, he wasn’t wearing many clothes. Not too comfortable, for sure, but closer to the “new birth” experience, for sure.

Today, the traditions of baptism are as varied as the numerous denominations present. Some people are sprinkled; others have water poured on them three times, in the name of the Father, son, and Holy Spirit. Some are baptized in what looks like a giant Jacuzzi, like our baptismal, and others still make a trek to a creek or a lake. Bill Leonard, a Baptist historian, notes in jest that maybe we should make it more of a practice to baptize in the creek, with the qualifier that we give them tetanus shots or send them to heaven right away.¹

Regardless of mode or methods, we practice baptism because Jesus was baptized, and Scripture tells us that those who want to follow him should be baptized as well. There’s a mystery in the water, in the Trinitarian formula, in lying back in the water and coming up with water droplets in our hair and face, wiping our eyes with wonder. Baptism is a ritual, and so much more.

I

Mark wrote his Gospel in a time of anxiety and confusion. A fire had destroyed most of Rome, and the lingering gray ashes that swirled in the wind served as a constant reminder. Emperor Nero began targeting and killing Christians with no mercy. To become a Christ-follower was a

¹ Bill Leonard, “Opinion: The River,” *Associated Baptist Press*, <http://www.abpnews.com/content/view/7042/9/>. Accessed 6 January 2012. He also noted that the *Didache*, an early Christian document, gave instructions on baptizing with cold running water.

radical thing, not to be taken lightly. Mark certainly takes these things into account when he writes of this radical baptism event.

Our passage opens up with John the Baptist, a guy whom most of us would probably find too extreme for us. John may make us uncomfortable. He wears weird clothing, says weird things, and makes his home in weird places. John knew Jesus was coming, and wasn't afraid to mention it to anyone who would listen.

If I had to think of a modern day equivalent to John the Baptizer, it would probably be Shane Claiborne. Shane helped found the Simple Way movement, an intentional Christian community with shared living spaces and possession. He wears dreadlocks and dresses casually regardless of the occasion. He says things that Christians know but don't want to hear, things about slave labor producing our clothing, clean water, and what it means to change your life and follow Christ. Shane Claiborne is not one to mince words.

Since Mark doesn't mince words either, even John's dress is important in the baptismal event. His leather belt, his camel hair shirt, his diet of locusts and honey—all point back to the Old Testament's account of Elijah, with a similar dress code². We see both Elijah and John both acting as prophets, both calling the people to repent. The Judeans entering into the baptismal waters knew that they were not only making a fresh start, but connecting with their ancestors of faith.

Mark doesn't say much of how Jesus got to John in the Jordan, or even the baptismal event itself. At first glance, it appears that Jesus is just one of the many standing in line to the Jordan, waiting his turn.

But something different happens when Jesus comes up out of the water, with water droplets gushing down his hair. We can imagine this event in slow motion, Jesus wiping his eyes, his sleeves sloshing in the cloudy water, regaining his footing on the muddy, squishy river bottom, and looking up into the sky.

Except the sky looked different. In a flash, the heavens ripped open, tore apart, like nothing that had happened before. The verb Mark uses implies that the heavens ripped apart to the point where they could not be repaired. The only other time Mark uses that verb was when the veil of the temple was torn apart at Jesus' crucifixion. A powerful ripping of the sky could certainly be noticed. Can you imagine what a hole in the sky would be like? To get a glimpse in what is beyond what you can see? Did the tearing apart of the heavens make ripples and waves through the waters, causing both John and Jesus to steady themselves in the water? Did the Judeans shield their faces in fear, wondering, trembling and gathering their children together?

And with the same urgency of the heavens opening, the Holy Spirit descends with rapidness but yet like a dove, in a gentle urgency, And out of that great big hole in the sky, a voice, with equal urgency, force, and gentleness, all combined in one, claims speaks to Jesus personally, clearly, strongly. This voice says simply: "You are my son. I love you. I am happy with you." And because of that day, Jesus' life changed, John's life changed, our lives changed.

² See 2 Kings 1:8

Was your baptism like this?

Of course no dove-like figure landed upon you, no voice from above spoke to you, unless your pastor was considerably taller than you. But do you remember the depth of excitement, the scariness of entering the waters, declaring in front of God and people publicly that you wanted to reorient your life around the way of Christ.

II

I remember as a 10 year old scooting around my grandpa at Centertown Baptist Church during the hymn of response and walking forward down the aisle to the pastor to profess that I wanted to follow Christ in baptism. I recall entering the warm water a few weeks later and seeing my parents, grandparents, family and even people I didn't know very well smiling back at me. I remember sitting during the sermon with wet hair, knowing at that age that my life would never be the same. Those same moments of joy are also some of the most fearful times in my life.

Most of us have stories related to our baptism or a baptism we've witnessed. I've heard of country churches heading out en masse to the creek in the middle of winter. I've heard of one child who was so excited he jumped into the baptismal pool and starting swimming toward the pastor. I've heard of older members who wanted to be baptized but couldn't manage the steps go to the YMCA swimming pool and entering gradually into the water.

What do you remember about your baptism? Did your baptism change your life?

Too often, churches have been guilty of reducing baptism to a family tradition or a magic formula³. Baptism may define membership to a particular church or denomination. Some of us may have been pushed to be baptized before we were ready. Some churches compare with one another the number of baptisms they have had, as if they are in a soul-saving contest, as if they themselves could save souls. When baptism is reduced to numbers, methods, and statistics, I wonder if it loses its mysterious transforming, Spirit-filled power that changes the course of our bodies and souls.

III

But I think the real question about baptism is simple, yet profoundly difficult: How have our lives altered because we follow Jesus through the waters of baptism? What are some different paths we take because we chose to orient ourselves around Christ? How do we do things differently because we confess to being God's children?

A Lutheran pastor, Sharon Blezard, sums it up best:

“Today we celebrate this holy collision of water, Word, and Spirit. In celebrating the baptism of our Lord, we also remember our own baptism, our incorporation into the family of God, and into this wonderful, countercultural, dangerous discipleship journey. By water and Word, God named and claimed us and gave us the gift of the Spirit. Nothing should ever be the same again; if it is, if the world is too much with you and you are distracted by worries and concerns, then trouble

³ The term “magic” comes from Bill Leonard's article.

those waters, my friend. Stir it up and remember whose you truly are. Let the grace and the wonder and the expectation wash over you again and again.”⁴

As the voice said to Jesus as he came up out of the water, God also says to us: “You are my son. You are my daughter. I love you. I am happy with you.”

If that doesn't change us, I'm not sure what will.

⁴ Sharron R. Blezard, “Holy Collision”, *Stewardship Of Life*. <http://www.stewardshipoflife.org/2011/12/holy-collision/>. Accessed 5 January 2012.