

## Reflection for January 10, 2021

### **Baptism of Jesus**

“Holy God, creator of light and giver of goodness, your voice moves over the waters. Immerse us in your grace, and transform us by your Spirit...”

This second Sunday, the Baptism of Jesus, commemorates the occasion of Jesus’ baptism when his role and ministry is made manifest.

This is where Gospel of Mark begins, not with the baby in the manger but with a prophet in the wilderness, water, a grown Jesus without backstory or pedigree, and the Holy Spirit.

This story lends itself to a practice that some of you may be familiar with, *Lectio Divinia*. It is a way of praying the scriptures. It is one of the ways I approach the text each Sunday. Before I breakout the commentaries and textbooks, I read the story to see how God is speaking to me hear and now.

*Lectio divina* (Latin, “divine reading”) is an ancient practice of praying with Sacred Scripture. Its foundation traces back to Origen in the third century. In medieval times, Saint Benedict instituted a more formal practice in his religious order, setting *lectio divina* as a regular part of the monastic tradition.

Lectio Divinia has four parts: (*forgive my Latin I did not take it in school...*)

- 1.) *lectio* (slow attentive reading),
- 2.) *meditatio* (read again-repetition is important, meditating on a word or phrase the jumps out at you),
- 3.) *oratio* (responding to God, through prayer, or writing, or art),
- 4.) *contemplatio* (contemplation, time to be still with God, rest in God).

If you were here in the room with me, we could work it out together – which would suit you extroverts. But all you introverts can relax. However, you might want to practice it in the comforts of your own home. You could rewind the video and listen to Jane read the scriptures again or open your bibles and read through it a few times. After listening deeply -are there any words or phrases stand out for you? What might God be trying to say? What is beautiful and amazing about this practice is how the Word is still speaking into our lives here and now.

The three words that stood out for me this time were: wilderness, torn apart, and Beloved.

Mark's version of John baptizing Jesus provides indispensable context for understanding what happens subsequently with Jesus' ministry and passion. God's dramatic acknowledgement of Jesus makes it clear that through the words and deeds of Jesus, we humans are encountering the enacted intentions of God. Jesus is presented as the fulcrum of God dealing with humanity.

John links Jesus to God's promises of the past. In verse 2 & 3 we hear the words of Isaiah:

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,<sup>[b]</sup>  
who will prepare your way;  
<sup>3</sup> the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight,’”

Like the prophets before him, John is preparing the way for the Lord. We get a detailed description of John's clothes – camel hair and a leather belt – reminding us of the Old Testament prophet, Elijah.

John appeared in the wilderness, evoking memories of the Israelite people's long wandering between deliverance from slavery in Egypt and entry into the promised land. John is baptizing in the Jordan River, the border between the wilderness and the land of milk and honey. John points forward to God's imminent intervention in human history to confer a new hope to humanity. It makes me think of the wilderness of our own time - a pandemic, a President inciting violent insurrection. Into the wilderness of our own broken lives and our own hurting world erupts the promise of new life.

John is not just any locust eating radical, but the kind of witness who stands right on the edge of the reign of God and invites people to live into the now-and-not-yet reality of it. I wonder who you look to point the way to God, who are your prophets?

So that is our setting, the Jordan River, on the edge of the wilderness. John the baptizer proclaiming a baptism of repentance and forgiveness.

Repentance is about two things. Truth-telling and returning to God and God's ways. You cannot have reconciliation without first hearing the truth. We live in a world of "false news" – it is time for truth. It is time for people of privilege to hear the truth. We will have a hard time being part of the kingdom of heaven if we cannot at the very least acknowledge how we have benefited from systems of oppression if we are not willing to relinquish some power. If we are not willing to hear the truth and repent, we end up being entitled. And that leads to things like storming the Capitol building.

And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem (do you hear the universality in that, *all the people?*) were going to be baptized by him.

John proclaims, "the one who is more powerful than I is coming after me...I have baptized you with water but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Then Jesus come to John to be baptized. And just as he is coming up out of the water, the heavens are torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him., and a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, my Beloved."

This is the moment when heaven and earth are transparent to one another.

And hear the prophet's prayer that God would "tear open the heavens and come down" (Isaiah 64:1) is answered, and the promise of "a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert" (Isaiah 43:19) is fulfilled.

The heavens are torn, and the Spirit descends...God is on the loose in the world. God who will cross all barriers and boundaries.

We with hindsight know that the heavens will open again in Mark – in the transfiguration (Mark 9:2-8) and again there is tearing at the cross (Mark 15:26-29).

And here we have God claiming Jesus as “Son” and “Beloved”.

God’s hailing of Jesus as “Son” was Jesus’ entrance onto the way that led to the cross. Karl Barth proposed that God’s claiming of Jesus in this story summarizes the essence of the gospel – the astonishing claim that God does not will to remain hidden in the heights of heaven but descends to the depths of earthly life to be seen and heard by us finite creatures.

When the world seems to be burning around us, this story has enormous importance. It speaks to God entering our lives, crossing boundaries, on the edge of the wilderness, about to create something new. And it speaks to a community of believers, people who mark their incorporation into that community, our community, with baptism.

Jesus did not receive the Spirit simply for his own benefit, but rather he includes us in it. Baptism is more than an individual act. In baptism we become part of a people. The Apostle Paul emphasizes how “we were all baptized into one body.

Baptism is not just water washing away sin or saving us – it means to be immersed in the community, it is a covenant relationship. A relationship that goes two ways. We are filled with the Holy Spirit, and thereby begin to understand the world differently.

It is important to remind ourselves of baptism, and to think about the ways that the Spirit has broken into our lives and claimed us as beloved. The baptismal liturgy marks the end of the old life and the beginning of a life lived in God’s grace and forgiveness.

Baptism teaches us who we are – God’s beloved children – and confers upon us the promise of God’s unconditional regard. Baptism reminds us that we discover *who* we are in relation to *whose* we are, God’s beloved children. We belong to God’s family, and baptism is a tangible sign of that.

Living as God’s children is not always easy. We are not called to comfort or security. We are called to love. Love our family and friends, yes of course, but also the people that are on the margins, the ones that it would be easier not even to see. We are called to share everything and hoard nothing. While the saving work of baptism is the Lord’s, our participation in the baptismal covenant is required.

We often speak of baptism as a “means of grace,” that is, one of the ways that God’s grace comes to us. Physically it is only a small splash of water, but it marks the beginning of a whole new life — of forgiveness, of the presence of God’s Spirit, of our union with Jesus, and our becoming part of the world-wide community of faith!

“Remember that in Baptism you have been marked by the sign of the cross, sealed by the Holy Spirit, and sent into the world to share God’s love in word and deed.”

*Nancy Walker*