

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

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Where Water and Spirit Meet

Mark 1:4-11

People love children's baptisms. My guess is that the baptism of a child is many people's favorite sacramental act. It's certainly one of the most enjoyable parts of my work as a pastor. The baby is so cute, all decked out in baptismal finery. The ceremony is so touching and so full of the unknown. Everybody wonders if the child will pitch a fit when the pastor takes her from her mother's arms? Or will he smile and wave at the congregation, maybe even play in the water? How will the child respond to the touch of water on the head? And how will the child grow into the hope of his or her baptism? Will he embrace the faith or reject it? Will she learn of Christ and practice her faith or will she turn aside and travel another path? When the baptism occurs we don't know. We simply act in faith that God is involved, claiming that child as his own. The baptism of a child is one of the most enjoyable events in the life of a congregation.

But Mark sees baptism differently. Which might cause us to think a bit harder about the meaning of our own baptism. Certainly when describing Jesus' baptism, Mark sees something more than a simple ceremony that everybody enjoys. Mark says that when Jesus was baptized, the heavens were torn apart, ripped open. Matthew and Luke report that the heavens were opened. Not Mark. Mark uses a form of the Greek "verb schitzo as in schism or schizophrenia."¹ Barbara Lundblad, a noted Lutheran preacher notes that, "It is not the same word as open. I open the door. I close the door. The door looks the same, but something torn apart is not easily closed again. The ragged edges never go back together as they were."² In Mark's view, Jesus' baptism was a cosmic event, ripping apart the barrier between God and human.

So how should we think about our own baptism? Should we see it as simply a ceremonial washing with water where we are somehow mysteriously cleansed of sin? To be sure, when we baptize infants, we are not used to thinking that way. Most of us have a problem seeing infants as sinners. So then, should we see our baptism as some kind of violent event where our lives are ripped apart and we are turned around? I think it was Will Willimon, Methodist Bishop, who once witnessed a baptism in a river where the somewhat overly zealous minister held the new convert under the water a bit longer than he was supposed to. The person came up gasping for air leading Willimon to comment "Somebody could get killed doing that."

While baptism by immersion is different from our practice of sprinkling, the meaning is the same. In Romans Paul says, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ... We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him." [Rom 6:3, 6-8] In short, rather than a simple cleansing, Paul sees baptism as nothing less than a death and resurrection. In baptism the old person in us dies in Christ, so that again quoting Paul,

¹ Barbara K. Lundblad, *Torn Apart Forever*, A sermon preached January 12, 2003, as published on the internet by Day 1, A ministry of the Alliance for Christian Media, Atlanta, Georgia.
<http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=88>

² *ibid.*

“as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” [Rom 6:4b]

In today’s scripture, Mark says that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness. There he was looking every bit the part of Elijah. Camel’s hair clothes, a leather belt, and food such as locusts and wild honey all point to Elijah. Add to that the prophesy that Elijah would show up just before the messiah, and you’ve got a story of major proportions. John “appeared” in the wilderness where Elijah disappeared. John appeared baptizing and preaching repentance. And the people flocked to see him. Like a voice from the deep past, he spoke. “This is what God intended life to be like.”

Original meanings fascinate us. We want to know what the writers of the constitution meant. The powerful ideas that established this great nation, also have the power to regenerate it. Part of the preparation for preaching involves seeking the original meaning of scripture passages. The assumption is that somewhere along the line we’ve drifted away from the original intention. Many think we’ve lost touch with the ideas and vision that guided our ancestors. And we agree. We don’t want to return to the past. But the ideas that generated so much excitement and energy still have value. Getting in touch with those ideas can restore our sense of well being. Original meanings are important. They have power to regenerate, to restore, to recall us to our true selves. But they also can shatter present understandings. They can turn our lives around.

A businessman told the story of a very important time in his life. He had the opportunity to undersell one of his competitors. It was a small family business that had no major impact on his business at all. It was just that he wanted a larger share of the market and that was one way to do it. He never really considered the other family, and the impact of his decision on it. That’s business. So the plans were in place. He had prepared the necessary authorizations. All that remained was that he implement his plan. Soon that small family business would be history. And he would have a minor coup to record on his record.

But before he could implement his plan he was called home for the funeral of his cousin. While at the cemetery, he walked around reading tombstones. First one, then another. His eyes fell on his grandmother’s tombstone. She had died when he was a boy. The proverb inscribed there struck him hard, “She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.” Suddenly he was a small boy again, sitting on her lap. He could hear her voice teaching him that proverb. He remembered her taking him to church, telling him about the time he was baptized. He must have heard that proverb a hundred times before, but he never heard it like he heard it that day. When he got home, he shelved his plans to destroy. Instead he began practicing his grandmother’s teaching of kindness. We might not see that as a violent event, but we know that his old world had been torn asunder. Out of that tearing, he was given a new life.

When we baptize children in the name of Jesus Christ, we bathe them in the water of righteousness, we promise them the teachings of kindness, we claim them for our Lord. In the next few years they’ll learn to speak, to read. They’ll learn to sing, to dance, to pray, to worship. They’ll learn good manners and how to treat other people. They’ll learn how to fight, and to make up. They’ll cram an incredible amount of learning into a few years. In short, they’ll form the memories that guide them in the future. As adults we know how hard it is to learn a foreign language. Without the memories of childhood, it is equally hard for adults to learn to worship, to pray, to be children of God. By participating in worship with us, children are equipped to live and to love in Jesus’ name.

The Christian pilgrimage begins with baptism. John the Baptist accomplished his mission, baptizing Jesus. But for Jesus it was only the beginning. His pilgrimage led through town and city, through acceptance and rejection, through sickness and healing all the way to death. In being baptized Jesus was signaling his intent to do all God asked him to do. We do no less. We are called to live the teachings of kindness, to love our enemies, to bear witness to the world that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God. We are called to remember our baptisms, not as some sweet ceremony, but as a wrenching call to new life. Where water and spirit meet in Jesus' name, new life begins.