

## **Bathed in Grace**

Baptism of the Lord Sunday

Mark 1:4-11

Sunday, January 7, 2023

Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

As a young girl growing up in Chicago in the 1930s, my mother would often visit her relatives downstate in Pike County, IL, which is not far from Hannibal. As she told these stories, these trips always had a bit of an air of adventure – including navigating the challenges of having more hog pens than plumbing. But she loved her cousins, loved watching the women of the church quilt, loved getting a break from the city.

On one trip, her father took her near the banks of the Illinois river where a church was having a preaching service followed by a baptism. My grandparents were properly domesticated Methodists and Presbyterians, which meant their interest in the riverside service was propelled by more fascination than devotion. They watched from the sides of the riverbank, but my grandfather, in a sort of teasing way, kept telling my mother she was going to be next in line to be baptized.

Mom was terrified that he was not kidding. There was just something about this scene that traumatized her—I think it is one reason why she always gave her Presbyterian pastors grief if they ever tried anything in worship that was in her words, “weird.”

Whatever her experience, what my mother saw was probably closer to Jesus’ baptism than anything she had ever witnessed. There’s very little about Jesus’ baptism which feel familiar to any of us. As a pastor, I have officiated at all sorts of baptisms. Each one has been beautiful and unique in their own way: there have been adorable infants dressed in heirloom gowns, rambunctious and somewhat water-adverse toddlers who clung to their mother’s for dear life; older children who were both shy and yet confidently intrigued by what was happening; adults who were making a profession of faith for the very first time.

They have all come to this font, this beautiful font designed and built by Norm Stoecker, who is a masterful wood worker and was a pretty good baritone in the chancel choir as well. Norm was trained as an architect, which meant he knew something about making

contingency plans. That's why he carved a second dove that is hidden inside the font in case of emergencies.

They have all come seeking the promise of God, discovering that grace which transforms and changes. A few have come kicking and screaming, others singing and cooing. But none experienced the wild, ferociousness Jesus experienced at the Jordan.

Mark's gospel opens with a partial sentence declaring the presence of God. There is no nativity scene, no shepherds, no angels. Instead, Mark opens with a declarative sentence: "The Beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Mark borrows his language from Genesis, a signal that his story of the crucified Christ parallels the work of God in creation. Mark's story is one of good news, and it begins with a messenger sent from God to prepare the way for the one who is to come.

Yet John's appearance seems to evoke the sort of fear and terror my mother felt as her father prodded her to the front of the baptism line. John is neither a motivational speaker nor an informercial huckster selling knife sets. Instead, John proclaims a call for repentance. He pulls no punches as he announces that God is beginning again, and we should, too.

This hardly sounds like what we mean when we think of good news. Good news, in our minds, is uplifting and joyful: "The cancer has not spread," "The treatments seem to be working," "I got a raise," "I fell in love," "The war is over," "It's going to be a nice day." One Bible scholar said that a more literal translation of the opening of Mark would be "good news of a victory from the battlefield."

Mark's story of Jesus entrance into the world is untamed and wild. This is not a domesticated event filled with happy songs and smiling parents. The crowds encounter a wild man whose breath smelled of a steady diet of bugs and honey and who was clothed in camel's hair and a leather belt, whose sermons are calls to repent. He calls them to make a U-turn in their manner of living, reversing their course so that their lives would be aligned with the presence of God.

When Jesus arrives, it is a cause for confusion and even suspicion. John's prophecy has been that the one who is coming will be more powerful than he is. But how is that the Son of God, the one without sin, has come to be baptized? Other accounts of the baptism remind us of John's confusion, an indicator of how the church struggled with a sinless Lord submitting to baptism.

Mark insists: this is good news. It is good news that God has slipped into our world. It is good news that Jesus stands with those whose lives are broken, who yearn for healing, who feel pushed down and oppressed. He comes to those who understand how far they have travelled from God, and stands with them. This is good news.

It is such good news that Mark tells us the heavens are ripped open – not just politely separated, but violently ruptured, torn apart. There the voice of God announces, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

When Jesus comes to be baptized, it is good news not because he arrives to participate in a generations-old ritual. It is not good news just because he might have worn his grandfather’s baptismal outfit. It is good news because he is the beloved of God, the one who stands the entire countryside of Judea. He mingles with those experiencing pain and loss, the heartbroken and lost. He comes not just to tick off another item in a long checklist of things parents should do. He comes to announce that God has drawn near.

It is Good News, and it demands our response. As Henri Nouwen once wrote, “The one who created us is waiting for our response to the love that us our being. God not only says, “You are my Beloved,” God also asks, “Do you love me?” and offers us countless chances to say, “Yes.”

I have never been to the River Jordan, but I am told that it is far less impressive than we sometimes imagine. The Jordan is not large compared to many rivers, though it is treasured by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Though less than 200 miles long, it serves as a primary water source of Israel, Jordan and Syria. In recent centuries, the Jordan has also become the source of agricultural and industrial run off. In many places it is so polluted no one would ever think of going near it.

A minister wrote recently that she had been so enthralled by the sight of the Jordan that she filled up a small bottle of water to bring home. Several months later, ahead of a baptism, she went to retrieve the water, only to find that it had turned a gross yellow-brown in color and had signs of sediment flowing to the bottom. Hardly the sort of symbol you want to bring out for a baptism.

Paradoxically, we are cleansed by this unclean water. Jesus is immersed into the muddy river, plunged into God’s grace. Jesus’ baptism may not be attended by choirs nor celebrated by a grey-haired grandpa. It is more terrifying than cute, an amazing declaration

of God's fierce, and ferocious grace. The Spirit descends and then drives Jesus deeper into the wilderness.

This is good news: yet somehow the message has been lost. This is the good news our world longs to hear, yet too often all they hear from the church is condemnation and judgment. It is indeed Good News that we are beloved by God, yet too often we fail to believe that.

I can still remember the day that Eric Henson came into my office carrying a hymnal. "Here," he said. "Read this. I think we should sing this as part of a baptism." I looked and I read: "God claims you; God helps you, protects you, and loves you too..." And so, we dare to promise God's children who come to be baptized: "God claims you."

So, brothers and sisters, siblings in Christ, let's go down. Come on down. Let's go down to the river to pray, studying about the good ole way and who shall wear the star and crown. Amen.