

“Baptized Beloved”  
A Sermon on Mark 1:4-11  
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The Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Our scripture text comes from Mark 1:1-11 this morning, found on p. 34 of the New Testament in your pew Bibles. Hear now the Word of God:

Mark 1:1-11

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. <sup>2</sup>As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, 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,’”

<sup>4</sup>John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>And 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. <sup>6</sup>Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>He 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. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

<sup>9</sup>In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup>And 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. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

The Word of the Lord. ***Thanks be to God.***

According to the Gospel of Mark, the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ begins before Jesus was born in Bethlehem. The gospel of Mark begins with an up-front declaration of who Jesus is: the Christ, the Son of God. And to make this claim, he goes back over five hundred years, quoting the words of the prophet Isaiah. Mark declares: “As it is written in the prophet Isaiah: ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” ’” And *then*, we hear about the ministry of John the baptizer, the one who was the messenger who preceded Jesus. Mark makes this connection between Isaiah’s prophecy “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness” and John the Baptist, to set the stage for what is about to take place: Jesus’ baptism by John in the River Jordan.

The passage Mark is quoting comes from Isaiah 40, a text we heard during Advent, when I preached on this text, which begins with “Comfort, o comfort, my people.” It’s in the context of comforting the people of Israel after they have been exiled into Babylon, that Isaiah writes these words: “A voice cries out: ‘in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the desert a highway for

our God.” Isaiah pens these words during the Babylonian captivity, which means they were written over five hundred years before the birth of Christ. So really, Mark is saying, Jesus’ ministry has already begun, since we have been promised his coming for centuries.

By linking the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to this Isaiah text, Mark is saying—“Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the One God promised to send, the One who has come to comfort Israel.” Mark wants to argue that Jesus is the answer to our cries, because there was a person who came before him, like a messenger to us, and that person was John the Baptist. And Mark’s readers know this because they have heard the preaching of John, who proclaimed himself to be the forerunner to the one who baptizes not with water, but with the Holy Spirit.

The baptism John proclaimed was one that demonstrated a person’s repentance from sin, a form of ritual cleansing, and a symbol of God’s forgiveness through the washing of water. And it is here, when Jesus comes to John and is baptized in the River Jordan, that Jesus’ active ministry begins.

But the very next verse that follows our text reads: “And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness” (v.12). Once baptized, Jesus isn’t sent to live in a palace, enjoying his place as the Son of God. Once baptized, Jesus isn’t given an opportunity even to rest. *Immediately*, the text says, the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness, where he was tested. He was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him. It doesn’t sound like an easy transition.

What are we to make of Jesus’ baptism? And what of our baptisms? What is the significance of this water, poured over our heads, in the company of the church? The baptism of infants, who are so young as to not be able to consciously choose God on their own, who are too young to have accumulated any sins to need confessing, we baptize persons as soon as possible because baptism is a sign and symbol that God has put a claim on our lives, that God has declared that we are beloved children of God before we could even choose God, before we even considered whether we might be worthy to be considered God’s children. Without needing to earn it or to believe a certain way, the baptism of young children is a reminder to all of us that we have been grafted into God’s family as dearly beloved children, and that it is not out of duty or moral obligation that we seek to serve God in ministry, but rather out of the knowledge that we are loved, that we have already been forgiven before we even asked, it is out of this confidence that we go out into the world to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

By water, we are baptized and called into new life. Whether baptized as children or as adults, our baptism remains for us a sign and seal of God’s covenant of love, that we have been called “children of God.”

Any good we do in this life is a living out of this baptism. Having been brought into covenant with God in baptism, we go out to serve the world because of this deep love of God that calls us to love one another, that calls us to further the kingdom of God.

But baptism doesn’t promise that our lives are free from hardship or trial. We see Jesus being sent immediately into the wilderness, and when he returns, it is after John has been arrested. John was arrested and later killed, and Jesus, too, was eventually arrested and killed, the lives of both of these men testifying to the real

dangers of following faithful lives that challenge the status quo, that call for an end to oppression, that call out the powerful for how they have mistreated the poor and powerless. Both John and Jesus were arrested, and killed, for living out the call of God on their lives.

Living out our baptisms is not easy, and yet we have hope to pursue faithfully what it is God has called us to do because of our baptism, because of what it symbolizes in terms of death and new life.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul speaks of baptism in terms of death: "all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." (Romans 6:3-4). To be baptized, according to the Apostle Paul, meant dying to sin, dying to the allure of the power of this world, and rising to a newness of life. Baptism, the immersion into water and the rising out again from the water is a symbol of death and resurrection.

We are in the middle of winter here in New England, and last week we saw temperatures drop well below zero. We see the world transformed in these winter months—we are not sure if anything out there can survive. Are these trees really still living? Are the birds and animals able to live through this cold? Winter seems like death, fallen over the land. But we've lived through enough springs to know it doesn't last forever, that come May, little bursts of green will be shining forth here and there, starting out as a trickle and then erupting into a flood of new life.

There's a children's book that captures this image of death and rebirth as seen in caterpillars, called *Hope for the Flowers*, written in the 1970's, and it was a book I was given in 2001 by some friends who had seen me through a difficult time in my life. The story is about two caterpillars—Stripe, and Yellow, who meet while climbing a massive caterpillar pillar. Apparently, all of the caterpillars thought it a good idea to see how high they could climb, so they all get on top of each other, pushing and shoving to try and see what's at the top. At the top, of course, is only clouds, but the climbing caterpillars don't know this yet. But they climb because they feel there is more to life than what they have experienced thus far in their lives of crawling and eating. Stripe decides to try climbing the pillar again, while Yellow insists it's a bad idea. And while Stripe is gone, Yellow comes across a caterpillar who is weaving a cocoon. This caterpillar convinces Yellow that caterpillars can become butterflies, but that first you have to go inside this dark cocoon. And you will never be the same. This creates great anxiety for our caterpillar friend, who isn't so sure she is willing to risk her life for the sake of becoming a butterfly—a far fetched idea, in her mind. We hear her internal processing:

"Yellow was torn in anguish: 'What if Stripe comes back and I'm not there? What if he doesn't recognize my new self? Suppose he decides to stay a caterpillar? At least we can do *something* as caterpillars—we can crawl and eat. How can two cocoons get together at all? How awful to get stuck in a cocoon!' How could she risk the only life she knew when it seemed so unlikely she could ever be a glorious winged creature? What did she have to go on? –seeing another caterpillar who believed enough to make his own cocoon. –and that peculiar hope which had kept her off the pillar and leapt within her when she heard about butterflies."

When the Spirit of God descends upon Jesus like a dove, Mark says the heavens are *torn* apart. Not merely opened, but they are *torn* open, echoing the cry of Israel in Isaiah 64: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!"

Here, in the form of a dove, God has torn apart the heavens, and God has come down, to alight upon the baptized Christ, and to declare that this is the Son of God, the *Beloved*. Jesus's ministry brings together a history of people who have longed for a Savior, and demonstrates before their very eyes that indeed, God has heard their cries, and that God has sent the Son to save the world, that God has torn open the heavens to come and declare that God is with us. And we carry that reminder with us, in our bodies of memory that recall to us the waters of baptism, that we have died with Christ and will rise with him, sealed in God's covenant of love, whatever wilderness we may face throughout our lives.

We are new people, and we are sent into the world wherever there is need, to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. For me, in my own journey, as I leave this church to teach at Boston College's School of Theology and Ministry this spring and online for a Lutheran seminary, I remember my baptism, and I trust that God will continue to be with me and with you, as this church continues on its journey. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity I've had to serve with you these past nine months, and I'm thankful for the ways you all will continue to serve in ministry, the ways you will continue to live out your baptisms through showing the love of God to the world. Amen.