

The Beginning of the Gospel: The Baptizer and the Baptism
Mark 1: 1-13

January 10, 2021

Each of the three years of the three-year Common lectionary we use features a different gospel. This year it is Mark, the first of the gospels written.

Verse 1 is also the title: ‘The Beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.’ From this title all the other gospels are called gospels!

When did the story of Jesus begin? Matthew traced it back to Abraham, Luke traced it back to Adam, John traced it back to the dawn of Creation. But Mark begins it at Jesus’ baptism, at the anointing and call of Jesus as the Son of God.

No miraculous conception, no birth narratives, no magi from the east, no soaring metaphysical ponderings. Mark is an

action-oriented man. As Joe Friday said, “Just the facts, ma’am.” His gospel rushes at breakneck speed from Baptism to the Cross and Resurrection. One of his favorite words is “immediately.” Scene after scene follows immediately upon the other.

So let’s begin the New Year and the season of Epiphany, of “showings forth”, with Mark’s beginning of the gospel at Jesus’ baptism.

I

The last time we saw John he was squalling in his mother’s arms at his circumcision and naming. I would have been squalling too! Now we see him in the desert wilderness wearing animal skins and living off wild honey and locusts. He is at the river Jordan, and he is preaching and baptizing people.

We call him the Baptizer. He was a one-man reform movement in first century Judaism. He was calling his nation to repentance, to baptism as a sign of that repentance and to the forgiveness of sins. The Jewish historian of the day, Josephus described him:

He was a good man and had exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives. To practice justice toward others and piety toward God, and in doing so, join in baptism. (*Jewish Antiquities* 18:117)

John was an uncompromising prophet of God; he saw things in black and white. He publicly condemned Herod for marrying his brother's wife. That and his growing following made him a threat to Herod, and it was not too long before Herod had him arrested and beheaded.

John was also not a fan of the religious leaders and temple authorities. And they were not fans of John. With John, people didn't have to go through the elaborate procedures of sacrifice and purification in order to receive forgiveness. John was baptizing anybody out here in the wilderness. For free! And people were flocking to him to be baptized. Organized religion is always trying to control the flow of grace, their hand on the spigot of forgiveness. It wants the exclusive franchise on grace. John and later Jesus were upsetting the apple cart. Grace was grace, as free as the flowing Jordan waters.

John believed he was offering Israel their last chance to turn from their sins and be saved. The prophet comes, as the cowboy poet put it, "just before beyond redemption."

But his mission also pointed beyond himself to Another:

After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

In my study at home, I have an old battered print of the famous painting of the Crucifixion by Grunewald. Karl Barth, perhaps the greatest 20th century theologian, had such a print in his study. It pictures Jesus hanging in hideous agony on the cross. On the left you see Mary the mother of Jesus and John the Beloved Disciple holding onto one another in horror and sorrow. To the right of the cross is John the Baptist pointing his almost impossibly long index finger to Christ. There is a Bible in one hand, a small lamb at his feet (the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world), and his outstretched arm and finger pointing.

That was his calling, and it is ours as well, to point to Christ, not to ourselves but to him. Paul would write to the Corinthians: “For what we preach is not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” (II Cor. 4:5).

Pointing to Christ: that is what we are trying to do however well or badly, trying to get our egos out of the way. Preaching not our vaulted opinions—they do not interest even us after a while. Offering not a spiritual do-it-yourself manual, but pointing to the only one who can finally help. Sometimes the Christ we have pointed to has been more the Jesus we have been taught than who he really is. But we are trying, saying, “Look at him, not at us.”

And we do so, as Paul says, as *servants*. When the church prefers to rule rather than to serve it has lost its way, and lost its soul.

II

And now, the Baptism. In three short verses. Mark tells us what happened. Verse 9: Jesus came from Nazareth and was baptized in the Jordan. Verse 10: When he came up out of the water “immediately” he saw the heavens torn open and the Spirit descending as a dove. Verse 11: A Voice came from heaven saying: “You are my Son, the Beloved; in you I am well pleased.” In you I take delight.

Did anyone else there hear the Voice? Probably not. Was this the first time Jesus heard something like this? I don’t think so. From the early years of his life I think Jesus knew himself as the Beloved. From early he experienced God as *Abba*,

Daddy, poppa, the perfectly loving God, the one with whom he had a relationship of intimacy, confidence and trust. But there, in the river as he came out of the sparkling water, it was confirmed.

One of the most profound meanings of baptism for us is the receiving into ourselves the message of our belovedness as God's daughter, son and of God's delight in us. A priest from Detroit traveled to Ireland to be with his uncle, Seamus, on his 80th birthday. One morning before dawn they went for a walk along Lake Killarny. They stood side by side and watched the glorious sun rise. Suddenly the 80-year-old man turned and began to skip down the road, his face radiant.

The priest said, "Uncle Seamus, you look really happy!"

"I am lad", the uncle replied.

"Wish to tell me why?" the nephew asked.

His uncle replied, “You see, me Abba is very fond of me.”

This is the delight God takes in you. Feel free to skip to church.

III

But that is not all that is going on at Jesus’ baptism.

God was adopting Jesus as Son, calling Jesus to his mission as the Son of God in the world. It was more than a bestowing upon Jesus a name and a belovedness. It was a call to be about the mission of God in the world.

In the Bible sonship, daughtership entails a calling. What is God calling you to be and to do as daughters, sons of God in this world? And how can we discern this, now, at this time and place in our lives?

IV

Which leads us, yes *immediately*, to the next dramatic scene. Next verse:

The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness forty days....

Drove him! Here is the Holy Spirit not as a gentle dove, but as in Celtic Christianity, a Wild Goose! A wild goose driving us out to where God needs for us to go and where we most need to go!

Discerning where God is calling us sometimes entails a time in a wilderness, a time away from all the voices but God's, a time when things are shaken up and re-arranged. It rarely happens in a comfortable chair in the T.V. room.

For Jesus this discernment of who he was as the Son of God involved a time of temptation, testing: As Mark says it: "tempted by Satan."

Mark provides no details about the temptations, but it was all about his vocation as the Son of God. Matthew and Luke filled out some of the details. Would he turn stones into bread when he got hungry? Would he aspire to be the emperor of the world? Would he do a somersault off the top of the Temple and parachute himself gently to the ground surrounded by angels to prove to all who saw that he was indeed the Son of God?

What kind of Son of God would he be? Would he be a minister for himself or for others? Would he rule or would he serve? Would he be spectacular, the golden chosen one, immune to the dangers of life? Or would he go faithfully, trustingly, bravely about his mission all the way to the cross?

I think we all have a similar set of testings and temptations about what kind of daughter/son of God we will be.

We can try to be *more* than God has created and called us to be and to do, in our own grandiosity and overweening pride. Or we can be *less* than what God has created and called us to be, shrinking back, playing small, settling for less than what God has in store for us. What will we do with our Belovedness? *Our calling is not a dreary obligation but the freedom to be exactly who you are!* The poet Mary Oliver asks;

Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life? ¹

VI

What a way to start a gospel! What a way to start a year! A baptizing, a belovedness and a calling to something new, and something more!

1. Mary Oliver, “The Summer Day”, *New and Selected Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p. 94

