

“Beyond Being Baptised” – Mk 1:4-11 – Jan 12/03

It seems like today marks the real beginning of the new year. Over the Christmas Holiday we've been busy enough here at the church but because much of the secular world goes on vacation during this time there's been little or no activity on the new building. Things started to get a bit busier toward the end of last week, but tomorrow things start to get right crazy. With activities such as registering societies, meeting with the designers to work on interior finishing details, and starting to separate stuff that needs to be packed for the move and stuff that should have been shredded years ago we will need to come up to speed – to a speed we haven't been challenged with before ... and this is only the beginning!

That demanding pace caused me to wonder what pressures Mark was under when he wrote his gospel. Mark writes with a particular leanness: he rushes breathlessly from one event to the next. Nothing in Mark's gospel develops over a period of time, or happens slowly. His favourite word is 'immediately', using it some forty-four times in his short work and he conveys a sense of breathless urgency throughout the entire story.

Recognizing Mark's headlong style, I wonder why he takes the time to introduce Jesus at all, never mind that he takes what for him is an inordinate amount of time and words to do so. Even more surprising, however, is the effort Mark takes to introduce John the baptizer: he actually provides a description and although incredibly brief the short description he paints gives us a picture of a strange yet charismatic and powerful figure.

In only thirteen short verses Mark provides a three-part introduction to his gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ; the three parts being the ministry of John the baptizer; the baptism of Jesus; and the temptation of Jesus. Immediately after those three events we appear in Galilee after John's arrest! We need to put on the brakes, to say, "whoa, Nelly!" refuse to let Mark drag us through this incredibly important event. We need to slow down, to savour the details, to ponder the implications, and to be affected by it anew.

Let's begin with his opening statement, "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." Underlying this short statement is a hint of intentional action, a hint picked up on and positively affirmed by Matthew. The implication is that this was no accidental encounter; neither was Jesus simply swept along with the crowds into the water, being 'processed through' a baptism mill. It appears even here that Jesus set out with intent to be baptized, to "fulfill all righteousness" as Matthew would put it. In this opening act of fidelity and obedience, Jesus demonstrates his willingness to surrender himself.

History doesn't inform us as to where arose the ritual of baptism that John proclaimed and which now forms part of his name. That enigmatic prophet called the people of Israel to repent (to admit to their sins, to profess a desire to change) and moreover to demonstrate the sincerity of their repentance with the rite of baptism, a ceremonial cleansing through dipping into water. While later gospel writers wrestle with the theological problem raised by Jesus being baptised by John, Mark has no such qualms. Apparently he assumes that his readers have no such problem, or at least that they understand Jesus' baptism was somehow unique. Mark saw John the baptizer clearly as the one proclaimed in scripture by the prophet Isaiah to prepare the way for the true Messiah, namely Jesus, and he rushes in an almost matter-of-fact way to confirm this understanding with a brief but spectacular introduction to Jesus and a description of Jesus' own baptism.

Mark tells us immediately that this baptism was not only substantially different but also unique, a particular event during which the echoing of the events of creation ushered in a new creation and proclaimed a new age. The heavens are torn apart, the Spirit descends upon Jesus

like a dove, and the voice from heaven deliberately and with true parental affection confirms Jesus as the Son of God. It is a grand and powerful start to a new creation, a new age, through the beginning of Jesus' ministry and mission.

We should note however that scripture offers not one word about the mechanics of his baptism, nothing about total immersion, white robes, splashing on the shore, ladles or pails, incantations, nothing. We know that the word baptism is related to the Hebrew word for ritual washing, and is elsewhere used in the context of dipping into water, but none of the texts go into any details of the mechanics. This should serve as a reminder to us that the power or the 'active ingredient' in the baptism is not a function of how 'purely' we perform the act. It is important for us to recall that although the actions are ours, the power is God's.

While the signs at our own baptisms were considerably more muted – quiet murmurs of appreciation from the gathered instead of thunderous rending of the heavens, we do understand along with the early church that in our baptisms we do indeed share with Christ the uniquely defining joy of receiving the Holy Spirit. That's why baptism is one of the two sacraments in our denomination; as part of the Reformed Tradition we hold that the crucial action is God acting through his Holy Spirit, providing a gift freely given as promised by Christ, given not partially or conditionally or measured out according to some human-defined formula. The church does not dole out God's Holy Spirit like a cough medicine, two tablespoons in response to one "I believe". The Spirit is a gift of God for the people of God.

As we share with Christ experiencing the gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism, so too we share with him the experience of being commissioned into ministry and mission. Jesus' baptism was the signal and the start of the events of his proclamation of the good news, his gathering disciples around him to help, his ministry to the sick and the poor and the sinners, his journey to the cross, and his resurrection from and victory over death itself, returning to send his disciples out as apostles. Being joined with him through our baptism we are joined with him also in ministry and mission, each and every one of us called to proclaim the good news, to minister to the sick, the lonely, the hungry, the rejected. Our baptismal certificates are not honours to be framed and displayed on the wall; they are union cards, work permits, conscription directives, and marching orders.

Jesus' baptism marked the beginning of a new creation, a new age, the start of a new way for God to express his love for his people. Here we are near the beginning of the church year, the start of a new calendar year, another year in the cycle of the life of the church. What better time to celebrate anew what God has done for us in Christ, to celebrate his gift of the Holy Spirit to us? What better time is there for us, renewed, re-energized, re-commissioned to set out on a new journey of ministry and mission? None of us can see with precise clarity what lies down that path, but every one of us can be assured that we can and will travel it both empowered and protected by the Spirit.

Over the next couple of years we are committed, with God's help, to a major project that will refresh and renew our calling as a congregation. We will build both on our property and on the foundation of our existing vision and extend it as we find ourselves called. We expect to move forward down one of the paths in the kingdom drawing upon the strengths and talents and energies that we share as gifts from God. I hope and pray that instead of seeing this journey as a difficult task (you know, much like the way teenagers do as they are coerced to help carry the stuff from the car to the cabin) that we can see it the way kids from a day care see their field trips. There will be moments when like the Israelites set out through the desert the journey will seem taxing and we may long to be back in the comfort of "the old." But there will also be

moments of triumph as we move toward a new place that offers us the opportunities to serve Christ in our community. Housing to enable seniors to age gracefully in place; facilities to provide cooking classes and craft lessons and social gatherings; meeting spaces for the community to forge new and lasting links; worship spaces that will inspire all to acknowledge, celebrate, and honour God's goodness and grace.

While this may all seem a bit daunting, we recall the blessing and power placed upon Jesus by God at his baptism, and how he moved on through a powerful ministry sustained by the power of the Holy Spirit. In our faith, we believe that we too have received power and blessing at our baptism that will sustain us on our journeys and mission in life. Celebrate and rejoice as you continue to move on beyond your baptism into and through that wondrous journey.