

Wesley United Methodist Church

January 11, 2015

“To Belong to God.”

Mark 1:4-11

Our Scripture for this first Sunday after Epiphany is the baptism of Jesus. Speaking of baptism, I understand that some years ago it was so dry in Texas that the Baptists were starting to baptize by sprinkling, the Methodists were using wet-wipes, the Presbyterians were giving out rain-checks, and the Catholics were praying for the wine to turn back into water. Now that's dry!

Let's discover God in Jesus' baptism. One place we discovered God most powerfully is in remembering our baptism. You know the story of Christ's baptism. John the Baptist was baptizing people in the River Jordan. People were flocking to hear him and responding to his invitation. Among those who came to John to be baptized was a young carpenter from Nazareth who happened to be John's cousin. John knew who Jesus was of course. He also knew that Jesus ought to be baptizing him. But when the appropriate time came, Jesus stepped into the water and was baptized by John. After he was baptized Jesus began to pray and as he prayed, heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

There are a couple of interesting things to note about Jesus' baptism. Notice, first of all, that when Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit ascended on him as a dove.

There is a delightful story about a family with young children that had started bringing their children to a church's preschool and kindergarten program. This was a new family in the area without much of a church background. Soon after going to the church the mom told the Pastor of pulling into a McDonald's restaurant and the kids were all excited. Well, what kid isn't excited about going to McDonald's, but that's not why they were excited. They were excited because a seagull landed on the hood of their car. Tell me, when is the last time or any time in your life when you were excited because a seagull landed on your hood? But they were excited because this little 4-year-old or 5-year-old in the car said, “Look Mom! It's the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove.”

Obviously that young tyke was learning something in the church's preschool. You might remember that the next time you see a seagull or a dove land somewhere close by. It may be the Holy Spirit trying to say something to you.

In the case of Jesus, the symbolism of the dove is profound. Remember, this was the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, The Messiah who so many hoped would be a warrior-king. Yet the Holy Spirit, which is characterized as the mighty wind or tongues of flame in other parts of the Bible, came upon Jesus in the form of a dove, a symbol of peace and meekness.

It is also worth noting that doves were the minimum sacrifice that a poor person could bring to the Temple to be sacrificed for his or her sins, even for the very poorest and least of us. And then recall that it was a dove that Noah sent out to find signs that the water from the great flood was receding. When the dove returned in the evening, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf. Then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth. The dove, then, was a symbol of hope and salvation.

So, from the beginning Jesus gave every indication that he was a different kind of Messiah. He came not as conqueror but as a peace maker; not as a master, but as a servant; not as a judge, but as a Savior. The symbol of Christ is not that of an eagle or a hawk, but a dove.

John the Baptist was a preacher of judgment, he was concerned that people live as they should according to the law. And even though Jesus came as a bringer of grace, he in no way repudiated John's message. Righteousness is an important characteristic of the follower of Jesus. People who are baptized ought to live differently than people who are not. They ought to be kinder, they ought to seek after justice,

they ought to be more forgiving and tolerant. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance and baptized persons ought to live on a higher plane than those who are not baptized.

There is a beautiful story told by the Rev. Sarchet who served a church in Chicago. A 10-year-old boy in the Rev. Sarchet's congregation named Cameron, walked into her office one day and said he needed to talk to her. Cameron was fresh from soccer practice. He was wearing a Cincinnati Reds baseball cap. But Cameron had a request for his pastor. "I'd like to be baptized," he said. "We're learning about Jesus' baptism in Sunday School and the teacher asked who was baptized and all the other kids raised their hands. I want to be baptized too." Using her best pastoral tone of voice, Rev. Sarchet said, "Cameron, do you really want to be baptized just because everyone else is?" His freckles wrinkled up at her and he replied, "No, I want to be baptized because it means I belong to God." His pastor was touched by his understanding. "Well, then, how about next Sunday?" she asked. His smile turned into concern and he asked, "Do I have to be baptized in front of all those people in church? Can't I just have a friend baptize me in the river?" She asked where he came up with that idea. "Well," he said, "Jesus was baptized by his cousin John in a river, wasn't he?" Caught off guard, she conceded, "You have a point, Bud, if a friend baptized you in the river, how would the church recognize it?" Realizing this was a teachable moment, she climbed up on her foot stool to reach for her Book of Orders that was located on the highest shelf. But before she placed her hand on the book, Cameron responded with these unforgettable words: "By my new way of life." Rev. Sarchet nearly fell of the foot stool. She left the Book of Orders on the shelf. She realized that Cameron's understanding was far from childish. It was profound.

Baptism whether it occurs as an infant, a youth or an adult ought to signify a new way of life. If there is one thing that is hurting the church's witness today it is that church people are indistinguishable from the general population. If people do think of us as different from everyone else, it is usually in a negative sense as coming across as close-minded or judgmental or intolerant.

Can you imagine a world where everyone lived out his or her baptism? This is to say that baptism is more than a religious rite, it is a rite of passage to a new life.

The truth of the matter is that many of us take our baptism for granted. Many of us have our babies baptized without truly thinking of it as a binding commitment on our own part to bring up our children as committed followers of Christ. As youths we are sometimes baptized because we have reached a certain age and our friends have been baptized. Even as adults, many are baptized with little recognition of what it means to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. For some of us, baptism is simply one of the rituals we go through as we make our way through life.

When you say, "I have been baptized," that ought to mean something quite significant.

I like the simple way that a pastor explained the meaning of baptism. He said, "When a lady gets married, she puts on a ring. That ring does not make her married. She could be married without a ring, just like you could be saved without being baptized. But what the ring does do is serve as a sign that she is married. Many times when you see a guy talking to a girl," Evans continues, "you will see his eyes go south as he is looking at her left hand to see whether or not she has already been spoken for and belongs to another. I am certain that a wife who refused to wear her ring would insult any man. He would probably take that as a rejection of him. And a man who had a wedding band and refused to wear it would probably insult his wife. The ring is more than a piece of jewelry. This piece of jewelry represents an institution and a covenant. Like a ring is symbolic for marriage, baptism is a sign of our covenant with God."

Jesus entered the Jordan River to be baptized by John not because he needed it, but because we need it. Baptism is a sign of God's grace. It is an initiation into the family of Christ. It is the beginning of a new life in him. It is Christ's dream for the world that all the world's people will experience God's grace and love and all persons will be baptized into his family. As members of his family, that should become our dream too. Amen.

