

Sacrament of Welcome

Mark 1:4-11

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The Baptism of the Lord

We've been through the season of Advent and made it through Christmas. The angel choruses have sung, and the decorations have come down and have been put away, along with the Tableaux and Christmas pageant costumes. And now we prepare for the long season known as Ordinary Time. On the one hand it's an unimaginative name: Ordinary Time. On the other hand, it nicely describes where we live most of our days, which is not on the Christmases or Easters of our existence.

We glossed right over Epiphany this year, due in part to the calendar. Epiphany was yesterday, when, according to tradition, the Wise Men arrived to find the baby. And it all seems rather abrupt, when you think about it. In the course of a couple of weeks we've gone from a baby in a manger to a 30 year old man appearing in the wilderness, wanting to be baptized. And then this text about John the Baptist takes us strangely back to where we were just a few weeks ago, in Advent.

But might I suggest that this baptism is where we need to be—one last housekeeping detail before the long season of Ordinary Time can grind on.

We generally think of John the Baptist as a hell-fire and brimstone kind of guy. Ax to the root, and so on. But that's in Matthew and Luke. Mark, the earliest gospel, strikes a different tone. Here it's about baptism. And the text says all those people were flocking out to the wilderness to hear John and receive his baptism.

So what drew them out there, do you suppose? Was John a great preacher? Was worship in Jerusalem dull and boring? Was it entertaining to hear John rant against the powers that be? Were those who went out their spiritually restless—the kind of people who hop from one religious experience to another?

Or, I wonder, were fleeing the religion as it was being expressed and practiced? That happens. We see it happening today and it is born out in numerous polls and statistics—the large numbers of particularly young people who are fleeing churches and religious expressions that are judgmental and exclusionary—that have an obsession with sexual purity and are indifferent when it comes to the environment.

The political agenda of today's so-called Evangelicals gives real Evangelicals a bad name. And it's a sad day when I, as a mainline Christian have to come to the defense of the true Evangelicals. Evangelicals were never fundamentalists. Fundamentalists, however, who have always feared science and never trusted facts, have stolen the term Evangelical and wrapped it around a political agenda that spews hate and bigotry, uses racism and nationalistic sentiments to divide us and further fan the flames of fear. And missing in all of it—completely missing is the Bible and Jesus Christ, the historic centerpiece of real Evangelicalism.

What masquerades as Evangelicalism today promotes the complete opposite of what Jesus taught. It is frankly, an abomination. And children, growing up in church listening to hate, hearing wrath and judgment, are being abused. They will flee when they are old enough to do so, but they'll likely be scarred as a result. And churches like ours suffer because of the horrible, general impression people have about religion and religious people.

So you see, I wonder if some of those people standing in line that day waiting to receive baptism weren't actually fleeing a religion that, if it didn't traumatize them, at least alienated them and marginalized them? Maybe the teachings shamed them and did a real number on their sense of dignity and self-worth. And so maybe, flocking out to the wilderness were the ones who'd had enough judgment, enough of the self-righteous defenders of the faith and keepers of the orthodoxy and protectors of purity, telling them what to do. They knew that in a system like that they didn't stand a chance, and neither did anyone else.

Swarming toward the cleansing waters of baptism were those who sensed in it a message of unconditional welcome—a new hope, a second chance and an opportunity to start fresh. And because John's baptism included both confession and repentance, those things became far less threatening since radical hospitality always invites honesty.

But because John's baptism resembled a variation of a temple cleansing ritual, it naturally made the religious officials nervous. Was he licensed to do this? Was he credentialed? But if the gospel is about liberation, and baptism celebrates one's forgiveness and a new life, then a visible sign and expression of that was needed.

In a memorable book I read entitled, *The Magic of Ritual*, by Tom Driver, he says this about the sacraments.

Fidelity to the gospel turns out to require treating liturgical form not as sacrosanct but as an occasion for creative expression. There is a gospel-based reason as well as anthropological reasons why sacraments have adapted themselves to varying cultural situations. Attempts to prevent this are always grounded in an imperialism that is at once cultural and ecclesiastical (p.202).

That's what John was confronting. And in a way, it's what we are asked to consider each time we baptize or break bread together. Our sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are means of receiving God's grace. We believe they are visible signs of an invisible grace. They celebrate something that is humanly absurd—something literally unbelievable and beyond all worldly explanation.

The sacraments are about a gracious welcome and deliverance from oppression, including the grip of death. The outlandishness of our sacramental claims, even in the face of our mortality and in the presence of evil and human suffering is what makes them hope-filled mysteries.

So then let us consider Jesus' baptism. Why was he baptized? We don't presume he had much to confess or from which to be forgiven. Well, perhaps in the same way he would break the bread with his disciples on the night of his arrest, he would also acknowledge his own humanity by coming alongside of others as they made their way down the muddy riverbanks and out into the Jordan River to be baptized.

Because how could you possibly minister to and ultimately die for the broken and the flawed and the repugnant—sinners of all stripes, if you didn't at least stand along side them and share in their walk?

And when he did that, when he waded out into the water and was baptized, it established his identity as God's own. It means that Jesus is who God says he is, just as it means we are who God says we are—children of God. That is what baptism celebrates. That long before we knew anything about it, God loved us and claimed us.

And because we are God's own, we need not spend time questioning our self-worth as a person or value as a human being. It means we don't have to worry about our acceptability in God's eyes. And it means that calculating all the things you need to do to earn God's love and favor is a complete waste of your time. God couldn't possibly love you any more than God does right now. I don't care who you are or what you've done.

That's the good news. That's the gospel truth. And it's the kind of sacred welcome that awaits anyone who comes to this Lord.

Amen.