

The Way To Faith

Mark 1:4-11

January 11, 2009

I.

Once again we heard a Gospel reading in which John the Baptist was on stage, but not center stage. If, however, we go back to the second Sunday of Advent last December, we would find a reading where John was the principal player as he went about the Judean countryside preaching about repentance and forgiveness (Mk. 1:1-7). And he baptized many people.

In today's reading, however, he baptized only Jesus, and so we focus on him rather than John. But remember that I just said John proclaimed a baptism of repentance and forgiveness. Why then did he baptize Jesus? We know that Jesus was the Son of God, and without sin. He had nothing to repent, and no reason to seek forgiveness. What was the purpose?

John probably thought that Jesus had it all backwards. Jesus should be baptizing John rather than the other way around. John should be the baptizee instead of the baptizer, so to speak.

But first, let's review the central points in the reading. John said he baptized with water, but Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit. Next we read that Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, and as Jesus came up out of the water the Holy Spirit descended upon him, and a voice came from heaven saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

II.

So, to repeat the question, why did Jesus, of all people, have to be baptized? Theologians and scholars offer several reasons. Some relate to Jesus, others relate to us and our baptisms.

There seem to be two reasons from Jesus' perspective. One is that his baptism announced the beginning of his ministry. It represented his anointing by God for the difficult work he would do in the world. The other reason is that the Holy Spirit came to strengthen him for that work.

But it didn't end there. Jesus' baptism also has meaning that carries into our own baptisms. Even though he was free from any sin, his baptism linked him in solidarity with all of the human imperfections and weaknesses that lead us to disregard God's will. By being baptized without sin, Jesus exemplified how our baptisms could cleanse us and help us be more like him.

Another reason is that Jesus' baptism sanctified our own baptisms and infused them with a holy character for all time. His baptism made our baptisms holy for us. When we are baptized, we are linked to Jesus' death and resurrection so that we might have new life in him in this world as well as in the next.

Finally, Jesus' baptism made baptism transformative for us. When we are baptized something inwardly and internally holy actually happens. It's more than just words and gestures as we stand around the font. The Holy Spirit actually enters us with the potential to take us into a new spiritual life in which we belong to God and become God's children.

III.

And from this background we can understand how God's approval of Jesus' baptism was the beginning of the sacrament of baptism in the church today. But when we think about baptism as a sacrament, we recognize that not everyone treats it in the same way.

For some people it's the beginning of a fulfilling Christian life. Baptism can lead them to grow in Christ and experience the faith they are called to have. For others, however, baptism never

becomes that essential foundation. For people in that category, baptism can be something like the familiar story of bats in the belfry.

I might have told this before, but it does make the point. Three priests were attending a clergy conference, and were discussing a common problem they all had. They all served at very old churches with very old buildings. Over time, it seems, that colonies of bats moved in and began living in the attic of one church, in the loft of another, and in the belfry of the third.

The first priest, with bats in the attic, said that he had used exterminators and fumigators, and nothing seemed to work. The bats were still there. The second priest, with bats in the loft, said he had tried loud noises and even brought in some cats, but that didn't work either.

Well, the third priest, who had bats in the church belfry, slowly smiled and said, "I went up there and baptized all my bats, and made them members of the church. They haven't been back since."

This story points out that for some people baptism is just something to be done, and that's all there is to it. It's just a box to be checked in life before moving on to the next item on the list.

But baptism means more, a lot more. And as we think about why Jesus was baptized for us, we also might think about our own understanding of our baptisms. What does it actually mean? How does baptism fit into our common life here at St. Thomas?

IV.

Many of us probably cannot even recall our baptisms. We were baptized as infants and, even though we have tried to lead the Christian lives that flow from baptism, we might have no memory of it occurring. And others of us who were baptized later in life still might not remember it as an especially important event.

After all, we're here in church, aren't we? We've pretty much done what our baptisms called us to do in terms of living Christian lives, haven't we? Producing good fruit now is what's important, isn't it? So why spend time thinking about the seed that was planted long ago?

Well, I would suggest that our spiritual lives can be enriched by a deeper understanding of what really happened to us when we went to the font, or the pool, or the river, and through that holy sacrament became members of the Body of Christ.

When Jesus was baptized the entire Holy Trinity was evident. The Father spoke from the heavens, the Son was in the water, and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove. All three were in the same place at the same time, something we will explore in greater detail during our study of the doctrine of the Trinity during our Christian Education class in May.

We also are baptized in name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and for us the Holy Spirit is, as I said earlier, transformative and occupies the central role. And the point I'm about to make is one I have made before. But the subject of baptism frequently arises and so, it would seem, that God wants us to pay attention to it.

Let's start with an analogy. In some ways Christian baptism is like Christian marriage. The words that the priest says actually cause something to happen. They are more than just words.

During the marriage ceremony, for example, the priest pronounces that the couple are husband and wife, and those words actually make it happen. They are not husband and wife until the priest says it, and they are husband and wife immediately after the priest says it. If something unexpected stopped the marriage ceremony at that point, and everyone left the church never to come back, the couple still would be married. The words themselves call something into being.

The same thing occurs during baptism. At the conclusion of the ritual, the priest says, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever" (BCP 308). That's when it happens. You can't see it but it's there. That's when we inwardly receive the Holy Spirit through God's grace, and the Spirit is sealed within us.

To use another analogy, we might think of receiving the Spirit within us as a glowing ember when we are baptized. And that ember always will be there even if we go through periods of unbelief or sin. But merely having the Spirit as an ember is not enough. It does not automatically mean that we have faith or are saved. That ember, to be effective, must be fanned into flames so that it acts upon us, and through us, and enables us to live fruitful and abundant lives in Christ.

That's what John the Baptist meant when he said Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit. It's not a second baptism, but the fulfilling of the first. Having received the Spirit in baptism, we then surrender ourselves to the Spirit to complete the relationship. For some people it never happens. For others it can happen in an instant. But for most of us it's a gradually unfolding process.

And in some churches it's called fire baptism. Others equate it with being born again. It might be like getting soaked immediately in a heavy thunderstorm, or like getting soaked over time in a slow drizzle. The terminology varies, but the end result is the same.

That's one of the reasons we baptize infants, as well as adults. It's not especially significant that infants do not understand at the time. It is extremely significant, however, that they receive the Holy Spirit at the time. The fulfilling of the Baptismal Covenant comes later with understanding, as the embers become flames and they give themselves to Jesus through the Spirit.

To use yet another example, we can understand that through our baptism we share in Christ's death and resurrection. St. Paul said in his Letter to the Romans (6:4-5) that we are buried with Christ by our baptism into his death, so that as he was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life

That's quite a statement. It means nothing less than the image of being taken back in time and laid beside Christ in his tomb at our baptism, and then being raised to a new life in him through his resurrection as we fully accept him as our Lord and Savior.

V.

So, baptism is central to our faith. Even though we might not recall how it happened, it is important that we appreciate what it means. And if we ask the Holy Spirit to lead us, then we will have the blessed assurance that comes with our faith. If the Holy Spirit goes before us into the world, we cannot fail.

If the Holy Spirit goes before us, then the words of our own Baptismal Covenant, which may have been spoken for us even before we knew how to speak, can become realities. I pray that those words are never far from our hearts and minds, and I would like to read them now. Here again are the promises of our baptisms by which we are bound to the Lord. They are:

- To continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer.
- To persevere in resisting evil, and, when we fall into sin, to repent and return to the Lord.
- To proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.
- To seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves.
- To strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every person.

Powerful words. They express strong promises. They confirm that we are members of the Body of Christ. And they are the way to a holy life. *Amen.*