

Sealed in Christ – January 11, 2015

Mark 1:4-11

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It's only been a few weeks since Christmas, and now we find the baby Jesus all grown up. So is John. We first met John during Advent, dressed in camel hair and dining on locusts and wild honey. He lived out in the desert and came to the people like a prophet as he began preaching about a new thing God was about to do.

He proclaimed a baptism of repentance and people were coming from all over in response to his message. Some no doubt were simply curiosity seekers, but many came to make a public example of their inner change of heart. For that is what repentance is, a change from the old life of sin into a new life lived in accordance with the will of God. But John's message went even further. He spoke about one who was coming after him. This coming One would have the power of God on him and would baptize not just with water, but with the Holy Spirit of God.

This was obviously different than John's baptism, which merely signified one's repentance. We may wonder, if John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, why did Jesus go to get baptized by him? That's a really good question. We believe that Jesus was without sin, that he led a completely sinless life, so why on earth did he need John's baptism? The simple answer is that he didn't. He didn't NEED to get baptized. But he did get baptized, and it was in his baptism that his identity was revealed. The baptism of Jesus signaled the beginning of his ministry.

Jesus did not need to be baptized. But he chose to do so. Why? Remember the name Emmanuel, which means God with us? Jesus is the Messiah, God's anointed. He is Emmanuel. He is God standing with us. So in this scene Jesus chooses to stand in solidarity with sinful humanity. He comes to the Jordan River, whose shoreline is filled with repentant sinners. He sees John dunking folks under the rippling waves of the water. He sees joy on the faces of those around him, of those who have consciously chosen to repent of their sins, to begin their lives anew, with a fresh slate.

In their faces he also sees longing. They long for the one about whom John proclaimed. They long for the One who would make all things new, who would baptize them in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is for people such as these that Jesus was sent into the world. And so Jesus wades out into the water, faces John and submits to his baptism. He is lowered into the water that has cleansed the sins of all those around. He is immersed into the water overflowing with their sins.

This is the first public action of the ministry of Jesus – choosing to be identified with sinners, choosing to be "God with us." And when his body breaks the surface of the water, when he rises to his feet – clothes, hair, beard – drenched with water from the Jordan - he witnesses the heavens torn apart above him. Remember that passage from Isaiah 64, back on the very first Sunday in Advent, where the prophet cried out to God "Tear open the heavens and come down! Do not hold our sins

against us forever. Do not hold onto your anger. Remember that we are your people. Tear open the heavens and come down!”

And on the opening day of his public ministry, the heavens are torn open in Jesus’ sight. God has come down from heaven in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, and through him God has provided redemption to all people. Following the tearing of the heavens, Jesus saw the Holy Spirit descending upon him like a dove. This signals the beginning of the divine activity. Up until Jesus came, the world had awaited God’s action.

The Holy Spirit, hovering over the waters of the primordial chaos, signaled the dawning of Creation. And now the Spirit’s descent upon Jesus here in the calm waters of the Jordan, signaled the beginning of a new creation. Something new, something completely unique was occurring. This new creation through Christ was the dawn of new life for humanity, indicating the tearing apart of the barrier of sin that keeps us from relationship with God. The heavens had been torn open, God has come to dwell among us, and as the late seminary professor Donald Juel writes, “God is on the loose in our realm, swooping into our world like a dove.” The barrier between heaven and earth is removed. And God is no longer to be seen as a distant, impervious God, sitting on a throne in some far off heaven. (The Gospel of Mark – Augsburg Commentary)

Then Mark tells his Gospel readers that a voice came from heaven saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” At the moment of his baptism, Jesus is identified and claimed by God. The Holy Spirit is upon him to begin his ministry.

It is in our own baptisms that we too are claimed and identified. Many of you were baptized as infants and have no recollection of what occurred. You cannot remember being presented by your parents or guardians and handed over into the arms of the pastor. You don’t remember if you cried or not when your forehead was touched with water, in the name of the Triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. You don’t recall the significance of that event. You may not remember being identified as a child of the covenant, a child of God, sealed by the Holy Spirit, and brought into the family of Jesus Christ. You may not remember since the decision to be baptized was made not by you, but by others on your behalf.

Some of you were baptized as older children or as adults, and you do remember your baptism. You remember giving your statement of faith in Jesus Christ, and you remember the feel of the water upon you. Yet you may not have really understood the significance of the event while it was occurring. You may not really feel any different.

In an article by pastor Barbara Sholis, there is an illustration from the movie *Tender Mercies* starring Robert Duvall. Duvall plays a character named Mac, who is a down-on-his-luck country songwriter and a struggling alcoholic. He fights his addiction with the help of a Rosa Lee, a young widow who offers him room and board at her roadside Texas motel in exchange for handyman help. In time

God's grace finds a welcome home in Mac's life, and eventually both Mac and the Rosa Lee's young boy, Sonny, make the decision to be baptized. Afterward they are driving home, and Sonny says to Mac, "Well, we done it, Mac. We was baptized." Peering into the truck's rearview mirror, the boy studies his reflection for a moment, and speaks again, "Everybody said I'd feel like a changed person. Do you feel like a changed person?" "Not yet," replies Mac. "You don't look any different, Mac. Do you think I look any different?" "Not yet," answers Mac. Like Sonny, we don't always recognize ourselves as changed people. Sometimes we can only perceive who and where we are only by looking into the rearview mirror, and observing the people, places and events that have passed us by. ("A Watery Solution," *The Christian Century*, Dec 18, 2002)

We sometimes forget our place in God's family and the claim that God has on our lives. And we forget that we, like Jesus, are the beloved children of God. Lawrence Hull Stokey calls this "spiritual amnesia." Often the drudgery or busyness of daily life causes us to forget who we really are. We forget our identity. When we recall our baptism, the watery rebirth into God's family, we can reclaim our identity. The water of baptism cleanses us from our sin, as we are buried with Christ. And then we are reborn into his family, into a new life. It is he who offers the living water, the water that assuages all thirst. When we take a moment to recall our own baptism, we can once again claim our identity as one beloved by God.

Christian author Henry Nouwen writes a beautiful passage that illustrates our identity in his book entitled Life of the Beloved. I invite you to hear these words this morning as God's message to you, "I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my beloved, on you my favor rests. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I have carried you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. I will give you food that will satisfy all your hunger and drink that will satisfy all your thirst. I will not hide my face from you. You know me as your own as I know you as my own. You belong to me. I am your father, your mother, your brother, your sister, your lover, your spouse. Yes, even your child. Wherever you are I will be. Nothing will ever separate us. We are one."