

“Living Out Our Baptism”

Mark 1: 1-11

January 10, 2021

Mark’s gospel does not begin, as do Matthew’s and Luke’s, with the birth of Jesus Christ. There is, in Mark’s gospel, no story of Mary and Joseph’s journey to Bethlehem where their son will be born, no shepherds keeping watch in the fields, no angels declaring the birth of God’s Son, no wise men bringing gifts to the Messiah. Mark’s gospel begins with the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River. Why? I believe that Mark begins his gospel by inviting us to recall our own baptisms and challenging us to remember the events surrounding our own baptisms; remember what it means to live as a child of God, disciples of Jesus Christ, in this world. So, I invite you to remember your own baptism – who was there, where and how did it occur. I was baptized as an infant in the Central Presbyterian Church of Atlanta, Georgia; a church located across the street from the state capitol of Georgia. Dr. Stuart Oglesby was the pastor who baptized me as my parents and grandparents vowed to raise me in the Christian faith, along with that congregation. They took their vows seriously and I was raised in the Christian faith, surrounded by the faith community and it shaped who I was and would become.

This week we need to remember who we are as children of God probably more than at any other time. I have watched in horror the rioting occurring in our nation’s capital. Let me be clear – there is simply no disputing that to be a follower of Jesus Christ – baptized into the faith community- that we are instructed to embrace the teachings of Jesus Christ and live them out: that we are to love and not hate, demonstrate compassion and not engage in violence, tell the truth, extend justice and hospitality to all

people regardless of skin color, ethnic background, gender, social or financial status.

These are the values which Jesus teaches and if we are united with him in a baptism like his, then we are called to live out that baptism as he will do. Let's consider how the gospel of Mark, the earliest of the gospels to be written, describes Jesus' baptism.

Prayer of Understanding:

Powerful God, whose voice penetrates the wilderness and calls us by name and whose transforming love is symbolized by the act of baptism, take us now to the River Jordan, that we might share Jesus' moment of self-emptying to receive your Spirit in all its power. Move us to remembrance that we have been baptized, that your grace was and is poured out on us, not because we have earned it, but because of your amazing generosity. Amid the wonder of it all, we would accept once more Christ's call to discipleship. Amen.

Read Mark 1: 1-11

Today we will be installing new elders/leaders in our family of faith; folks that you have elected to serve this congregation. And so, I would invite us to consider the implications from today's scripture reading for their ministry among us in the days and months ahead. And I would invite us to consider our own baptisms and what difference that baptism makes in the manner in which we choose to live our lives.

"In those days Jesus came from Nazareth....." I have searched through the scriptures and Nazareth is not even mentioned in the Old Testament. Who in the world has ever come from Nazareth? Nothing of note seems to have ever come from Nazareth in the past. Is Mark trying to alert us to the fact that something new is about to happen with this person Jesus? He is coming from a place we have never heard of before. Elders

elect could it be that something new may be stirring as you are installed to begin this particular ministry among us?

“And just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.....” He saw the heavens torn apart – by whom – we assume God. Jesus did not tear them apart. And there is one other time in Mark’s gospel that this kind of tearing takes place; when the Temple curtain is ripped apart at the end of Mark’s gospel as Jesus takes his last breath on the cross. God’s initiating, dramatic entrance into our human world serves as book ends to Mark’s gospel story. This is a God who is determined to be in relationship with our human family whether we like it or not, whether we acknowledge it or not, whether we choose to respond to God’s presence or not. The undeniable truth, according to Mark, is that God is present in our world because of God’s own choosing. It is our responsibility to discern God’s presence in our midst. We do not initiate that presence of God in our midst. God is already here. Elders elect you are called to help us gain clarity about God’s presence in our midst and to help us understand what God is up to here Peace Presbyterian Church of Winterville, NC. Not all by yourself – we are called to help you. The baptism of Jesus, and our baptisms, is a public declaration of the promise of God: “I will be your God. I choose you. And I will never let you go.” But we do have choices. Will we follow where Jesus leads us, seek to serve Jesus or not?

“And a voice came from heaven: You are my beloved Son and I am pleased with you.” This comes before Jesus ever taught the first parable, healed the first disease, challenged the first Pharisee, performed the first miracle, even before he called the first disciple. God loves Jesus, and you and me, for who we are, not because of what we have

done or will do. Baptism reminds us that we are who we are as a divine gift not because of our human achievement. Our identity is given. We are no longer orphans who are desperately trying to get into God's good graces. We have already been adopted into God's family and our response to that gift is how we live out our baptism.

When I was a teenager, as I was preparing to go out on a Friday or Saturday night date, my mother would admonish me: "Now, don't forget who you are!" She was not referring to my name and address; she was reminding me of the values with which I had been raised. She knew that the temptations to listen to other alien voices espousing foreign values were numerous and had tremendous allure and she did not want me engaging in destructive behavior. Through baptism we have, by God's initiating action, been claimed by God and united with Jesus Christ in a ministry like his. When we go out into the world, we would do well to remember who we are and whose we are and the values inherent in being members of Christ's family. Elders – remember who you are, who called you and the ministry to which God through Jesus Christ has sent you. Don't confuse the surrounding culture or community's voice with God's voice and don't second guess your calling. God has claimed you and sent you to be about Christ's work among us.

Being united with Jesus Christ also means that we become members of his family. Erma Bombeck describes an annual event in her family when they all gather at Thanksgiving for the Christmas Card Picture. "Last year's picture had one grown child sitting on the sofa in a coat and tie but he was not wearing any shoes. Our daughter was looking straight into the camera with her eyes closed and the youngest son was hanging over my shoulder with a temperature of 102. The family. We are a strange little band of

characters trudging through life sharing diseases and toothpaste, coveting one another's desserts, hiding shampoo just to be mean or perhaps get attention, borrowing money, locking each other out of our rooms, inflicting pain and kissing to heal it in the same instant, loving, laughing, defending, and trying to figure out the common thread that binds us all together. Sitting there for our Christmas picture I thought about how the years have challenged families in a way no one would have thought possible to survive. They have weathered tragedies, celebrations, dysfunction. They have been assaulted by technology, battered by sexual revolution and confused role reversals. But they are still here – playing to a full house.” And so, it is true of our faith family. We are sometimes loving and laughing, sometimes hurting and trying to ease hurt, arguing and defending, challenging and supporting, confessing and forgiving, trying to lock each other out of our rooms, coveting desserts, weathering all kinds of storms, and we continue to hang with each other by a thread at times and thick rope at other times – that tie that binds us is Jesus, the beloved Son of God. We are an interesting group of folks – diverse in every way. But we are called, through our baptism, to remember who we are and whose we are; it is God who has called us together and God's Spirit that blows among us.

Elders, Jesse, Russ, Janet and Pam, we need for you to love us for who we are but to challenge us to live out our baptism. We need for you to remind us that God is present among us, perhaps doing some entirely new things and that is okay. We need for you to invite us to discover our own gifts for ministry and help equip us for service in Christ's church.

If you show us how, we will follow. And we promise that we will pray for you as you begin your ministry among us.