

“Fire and Water”
Mark 1:4-11
Sunday, December 25, 2011
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

My thanks to King Duncan for this story:

“Sam Houston was the first president of the Republic of Texas. It's said he was a rather nasty fellow with a checkered past. Later in life Houston made a commitment to Christ and was baptized in a river. The preacher said to him, ‘Sam, your sins are washed away.’ Houston replied, ‘God help the fish.’ Although most of us were not baptized as adults in a river, we can probably relate to this reply.”

Next Sunday we have the joy of baptizing Ethan Fox, a young man in our church family. The timing is good. Today is the Sunday in the church year when we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is good for us to reflect on the meaning of baptism today, as we remember Jesus’ baptism, and as we anticipate the Holy Sacrament of Baptism for Ethan next week.

I. Baptism is a Mystery. Fire and Water.

There are two sacraments in the doctrine of the United Methodist Church: Baptism and Communion. The Greek word for “sacrament” is “mystery.”

Baptism is a mystery. It is wrapped up in deep, rich symbols that dive below the surface of our conscious minds and touch places in our souls we are barely aware of; ancient, mysterious places.

Water is one symbol. As we say with all the symbols of the sacraments, it is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. In the Thanksgiving Over the Water in the

Baptism liturgy, we recall God's mighty acts; how He "swept across the dark waters and brought forth light" at the creation of the world; how He "saved those on the ark through water" in the days of Noah; how He led the Hebrew children from slavery in Egypt "to freedom through the sea;" how He brought their children through the Jordan River to the land which He had promised."

The prayer goes on to talk about the water of Mary's womb that nurtured the baby Jesus before His birth. And then we get to Jesus' baptism. The prayer says it this way: "[Jesus] was baptized by John and anointed by [God's] Spirit." Jesus then called His disciples "to share in the baptism of His death and resurrection and to make disciples of all nations."

We are made of water. Our bodies are 75% water, as is the Earth on which we live. Water washes us clean. When we are thirsty, water quenches our thirst.

In spiritual terms, water Creates, Redeems and Sustains us, as God is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

Grant Gallup gives a homespun picture of the waters of baptism. He writes:

"Baptism is called an Epiphany for Jesus, and it is for us as well: a surprising revelation of the presence of God in us.

"It's a rite that's been around a long time -- Jews baptize Gentiles that want to become Jews: it washes away the pollution of the Gentile world, its godless culture, its unbelief, its unfaith. Baptisms were not strange to the Jews of Jesus' day. There were baptisms (washings) at the pool of Siloam, where an angel stirred the waters, and in the Qumran community. Baptism was nothing new for John the Baptizer, it was nothing unheard of for Jesus of Nazareth. Baptism also certainly has the authentic component in it of cleansing -- obviously, water is used (and Baptism means it's used in abundance, not in atomizers or aspergillums) and if you wash up or

bathe, it must be because you're not clean to begin with. Jesus thought footwashing was good enough if you had already had the tub bath of forgiveness. The rite of Baptism, both as Bath House John and his disciples practiced it and the Church has taught it, has sometimes an overpowering aspect of getting rid of dirt, of sin, of offenses. That misses rather grandly the whole point of a bath, which is a preparation. We bathe because of what we've got planned for after the bath -- we're going to put on clean clothes and go to a party or to church or even to bed to make love or go to sleep. And Baptism for J.B. meant also new behavior: Open your clothes closets and get out the clothes to share with the poor, open your pantry and your fridge and share the food with hungry people across town. That's what baptism requires.”

What a picture, “the tub bath of forgiveness.” The water of Baptism is a multi-faceted symbol.

Fire also has rich imagery for us. The energy of fire is a creative force that, by God’s hand, formed the universe. Fire redeems us in a refining way, as it burns away all the chaff, the unnecessary clutter of our lives. Fire sustains us, keeps us warm, burns the fuel of food within our bodies to keep us functioning.

Fire is a symbol of the passion, the energy of our faith. If you want to have Passionate Spirituality – which is a key goal for our congregation right now (pause for a quick commercial – sign up for the Passionate Spirituality class!) – Baptism is the foundation. The power of the Holy Spirit, as symbolized in fire and water, is the source from which a passionate spirituality flows.

The Holy Spirit’s presence at baptism is a mystery that surrounds us and fills us with the cleansing, healing, protecting, nurturing power of water and fire. The Holy Spirit’s presence is within us and around us, empowering us with the real presence of Jesus Christ, blessing us as we

partake in the ritual that He himself experienced in the Jordan River. The Holy Spirit also challenges us to live changed lives, to fulfill the mission and ministry which was inaugurated at Jesus' baptism.

As Billy D. Strayhorn writes in his book, Drink Deep, “[Baptism] changes everything. It cleans us up and gives us a starting over point. And it reminds us just how much we are loved. And all we're asked to do is drink deep from the water of life.”

But the question arises, why does Jesus have to be baptized at all?

II. Jesus is Baptized by John. Why?

John's baptism, according to Mark's gospel, is “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

Jesus does not need repentance.

Jesus does not need forgiveness.

So why does Jesus need to be baptized?

This baptism – Jesus' baptism – serves a different purpose.

A. Jesus' baptism announces the beginning of His presence and His ministry on earth.

Jesus' baptism announces the beginning of His presence and His ministry on earth. In Mark's gospel, Jesus is a “messianic secret.” The reader knows the secret: Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. But this secret is kept hidden from the other actors in Mark's telling of the story of Jesus.

The heaven's are “torn apart” in Mark's version of the baptism events. Mark only uses this violent verb in one other place in his gospel – at Jesus' death on the cross, when the curtain of the temple is “torn in two, from top to bottom” (15:38). The heavens are torn apart to mark

the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry, and the curtain of the temple is torn apart to mark the end of his life and mission on earth.

B. Jesus' baptism with water creates the context for the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' baptism with water creates the context for the arrival of the Holy Spirit. This arrival was foretold in the Old Testament.

Mark's gospel also describes the Holy Spirit descending like a dove upon Jesus. The dove emphasizes the descending nature of God's Spirit. The Greek phrase for "on him" could more accurately be translated as "into him." The long-absent Holy Spirit is now present to anoint Jesus as God's chosen one and to inwardly empower Jesus and His ministry.

C. Jesus' baptism reveals His true identity and His relationship to God.

Well, if all this weren't enough to convince anyone of who Jesus is – heaven's torn apart, dove descending -- God calls Him "my Son, the Beloved" (verse 11). Jesus' baptism reveals His true identity and His relationship to God.

The only other time God's voice addresses Jesus is during the Transfiguration (9:2-8), calling Him, once again, "my Son."

Mark records God as saying: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." This phrase appears to be a combination of Psalm 2:7, "You are my Son," and Isaiah 42:1, "my chosen, in whom my soul delights."

Psalm 2 is a royal psalm. Isaiah 42 introduces the first of the suffering servant songs.

Together, these two messages complete the secret identity of Jesus. He is the Servant King, who suffers and dies for us on the cross, and who is raised in glory. His kingdom is established forever.

Thomas G. Long tells this story about Albert Einstein in his book, Shepherds and Bathrobes:

“In Princeton, New Jersey, there is a legendary tale about the eminent scientist Albert Einstein walking in front of a local inn and being mistaken for a bell boy by a dowager who had just arrived in a luxury sedan. She orders him to carry her luggage into the hotel, and, according to the story, Einstein does so, receives a small tip, and then continues on to his office to ponder the mysteries of the universe. True or not, the story is delightful, precisely because we savor from the beginning a secret the dowager does not know: the strange-looking, ruffled little man is the most celebrated intellect of our time. Some stories gain their power from our knowing the story’s secret from the start.

“The Gospel of Mark is just such a story. The secret of Mark’s Gospel is the identity of Jesus Christ. In the very first sentence of the Gospel story, Mark lifts the veil and lets us know the secret when he says that this is”... the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.’ Jesus is the Son of God, that’s the secret, and lest we miss it, this hidden truth is confirmed in the story’s opening episode, when Jesus, coming up out of the waters of baptism, sees the Holy Spirit descending upon him like a dove from the heavens, which have been torn open like a piece of cloth, and hears the very voice of God telling the secret: ‘Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased’ (Mark 1:11). Only Jesus sees the Spirit; only Jesus hears the voice. This is, in the words of one commentator, ‘a secret epiphany.’”

III. We Are Baptized. Why?

At this point we might ask: why do we get baptized? What is the reason? If Jesus has done all the work, why not just say thank you and worship Him and call it a day?

Often as I drive around Yucaipa on various errands I come around a corner and it is just as if the heavens are torn open. A magnificent cloud cover is broken open by a dazzling ray of light that cuts through the sky like a sword, illuminating whatever it touches.

You all know what I mean. You've seen this amazing, glorious sight, as well. It is as if God were reaching down to touch the earth with His finger.

This is the image that comes to mind as I read Mark's description of Jesus' baptism. God tears open the heavens. Like a ray of light He reaches down to touch His Son. Like a peal of thunder or the whisper of a breeze or the crackle of a campfire He declares to Jesus, "You are my Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

We, too, are beloved. As we participate in the sacrament of Holy Baptism, we participate in Jesus' baptism. We participate in His ministry – His life, death and resurrection. We experience the mystery of the Holy Spirit's presence, the fire and the water, the creative and redemptive power that sustains us. The saving grace that cleanses us from our sins and makes us right with God. The bath that gets us ready for the big heavenly party.

We become a member of the community of the baptized, the community of the church. This means we are connected, not only with the baptized Christians at the United Methodist Church of Yucaipa, but with all the baptized Christians of every denomination in Yucaipa – the Catholics and Lutherans and Presbyterians and Assemblies of God and Congregationalists and Baptists and Episcopalians and all the other denominations to numerous to mention.

And not only that. We are connected with all the baptized Christians in Calimesa, and Beaumont, Palm Springs and Big Bear, Highland, Riverside, San Bernardino, L. A., San Diego and San Francisco. We are connected with baptized Christians throughout California, throughout the United States, Canada and Mexico, throughout North America and South

America, Europe and Africa, Asia and Australia, and even Antarctica... Are there any 5th graders in the room? Did I cover all the continents?

Through baptism, we become members of the family of baptized Christians throughout the world. We belong.

Ultimately, Baptism cannot be explained. It can only be experienced. It is an outward sign of an inward and spiritual grace. It is an expression of our love for Jesus and our relationship with Him. It is an expression of God's love for us before we knew we needed Him. It is a sign of our decision to be a part of the church, to join this scruffy band of rough and tumble sinners who love each other, who love Jesus, and who try to serve Him as best we can.

Baptism is this, and much more. It is a mystery. It is a sign of the love and grace of God. Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Loving Father, Beloved Son, and Nurturing Holy Spirit.

Closing.

St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, says it well:

“I bind this day to me forever
By the power of faith Christ's incarnation,
His baptism in Jordan River
His death on the cross for my salvation
I bind myself to the flashing of the lightning free,
The whirling wind's tempestuous shocks,
The stable earth, the deep salt sea,
Around the old eternal rocks.”

If you have been baptized, know that your baptism is a sign of repentance and forgiveness. You have accepted the challenge to live a new life in Christ.

If you have been baptized, know that the Holy Spirit of God in Christ Jesus was present at your baptism and lives within your heart today. You are empowered by that same Holy Spirit that descended like a dove into the heart of Jesus at His baptism. You are empowered by the fire of that Holy Spirit to live a new life. Jesus the Beloved Son of God lives in your heart.

Remember your baptism and be thankful.

If you have never been baptized, what are you waiting for?!

I challenge you to pray to God right now, in this service today. I challenge you to ask Jesus to come into your heart. I challenge you to see me after the service today and to make a decision to be baptized as a sign of your new life in Christ. There is room at the fountain for more than one next Sunday.

Right, Ethan?

Amen.