

Baptism of the Lord Sunday
January 10, 2021
Mark 1:4-11

In order to get to the crux of this Gospel reading this morning, we're essentially going to have to forget everything we've heard and talked about for the last three or four weeks. That is, to understand what is happening here in Mark's account of Jesus' baptism, we need to simply erase or delete, if possible, any thoughts of Christmas or the birth of Jesus in the manger or the visit of the magi from the East. For at least for the purposes of this morning's worship, don't think about King Herod or the shepherds or the angel Gabriel visiting Mary to tell her she's going to conceive a child and name him Jesus. As hard as it may be to do, just forget that you ever heard about any of that.

Why? Why throw these things out the window? Because Mark doesn't talk about any of it in his story about Jesus. Not one bit of it. As far as Mark is concerned Jesus' life begins with his baptism in the River Jordan. The first thing that Mark tells us about this man Jesus is that he shows up one day on the banks of the River Jordan there in the Judean countryside and lines up with all of the other people to get baptized by John. Maybe Mark doesn't know about Jesus' birth and early life. Maybe he does but he doesn't find it particularly important to understanding Jesus.

I remember that when I worked in Egypt with refugees from Sudan, every year most of them would celebrate their birthdays on January 1. I thought that was incredibly coincidental. How did all of these people from all different villages in the remote areas of southern Sudan get born on the same exact day, even on different years? As it turns out, they didn't. The reality was none of them knew their real birthday because that kind of information wasn't really valued to them and many of them were born in such primitive regions without medical care that dates and times weren't officially recorded. As it turns out, however, when they apply for refugee status with the United Nations, they have to put down some date on the official form. From their perspective, it must be a strange funny detail to include to prove their humanity. So, most of them just go with the year they were born in, which they know, and rather than make up a day they default to January 1.

Mark defaults to this baptism by John. John is preaching and performing a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. That is, people came to be washed by him in the Jordan in order to demonstrate their readiness to live in God's coming kingdom. They probably weren't the most religious people you could find, but (in contrast to the most religious types) these people knew their sin—that is, their shortcomings, their brokenness—was causing them to live out of step with God. They knew enough to know that their own sinfulness and imperfections were somehow not what God expected of them and that in God's kingdom, only the cleanest and purest would be appropriate. Repentance is a fancy way of saying a change in mind, or a change in heart. That's what they felt—a need for a change in mind. So, in spite of the fact that the River Jordan was and is one of the muddiest, dirtiest rivers around, they came by the hundreds to be made clean and to show, through their repentance, their readiness to be claimed for God's kingdom.

So, in the midst of this hodge-podge group of sinners stands our Jesus. He comes to John, also. He moves along, right there in among all of the ordinary folks—all those who have gotten in trouble with the law, all those who have made bad mistakes with their lives or some other crime of the heart, all those who've ever let God down in any way. It may seem a little strange to imagine Jesus there, in that line, because, to our knowledge, he has done nothing to get in trouble with anyone. Mark has told us he is the Son of God. And, in addition to that, John himself declares that one is coming after him who is so powerful and outstanding that it may seem he won't even need to be baptized. John says he won't even be worthy to stoop down and untie his sandals. Yet there Jesus is, placing himself shoulder to shoulder with everyone else, like he could pass for one of us. And when Jesus is baptized, he sees the heavens torn open and the Holy Spirit descending like a dove. A voice thunders from above, identifying this ordinary man as the Beloved Son of God.

By telling us the story about Jesus' baptism and using it as the starting point of Jesus' life, Mark means to get this important lesson across: Jesus comes to be immersed in the experience of humanity. God anoints Jesus to be his Son and yet have him live as a man. There will be no hiding Jesus' mission to be one of us and feel all the pushes and pulls of life lived in the news of the coming kingdom of God. By having Jesus' baptism begin his story about Jesus, Mark underscores Jesus' solidarity with us, that though he is clearly divine, Jesus comes to be the human God created us to be.

I don't know if you've noticed or not, but often when we mess up or make a mistake, we are prone to say something like, "Oh, I'm only human." When we do that, we imply that humans are, by nature, sinful and imperfect and can't be expected to live up to God's standard. While that sentiment is well-meant, if we consider the baptism of our Lord and what happens to Jesus from here on out, it is not a proper description of reality. It's not because we're human that we make mistakes, but because we're sinful. Sin makes us less than human. It distorts our true humanity, which is to live in full communion with our Creator. Instead of responding with the excuse, "After all, I'm only human," we should say, "After all, I'm a sinner."

This is why Jesus' baptism is so critical, though it may seem odd to picture Jesus in there with all those sinners: in Jesus true humanity is redeemed and shown for what God originally intended it to be, for joy and pleasure in the sight of God, for the freedom to live to our utmost potential of love. We take the word "human" and drag it through the mud. Jesus takes back the word "human" and plunges it in cleansing water. As the dove descends overhead, a new creation is begun in Christ that will overtake the world. From this wet start, Jesus will embark on a mission to claim back for God all that has been married by sin. From this riverside, Jesus begins life by interpreting God's law to show mercy and love and to live God's will even to the point of death. Thanks to Jesus, when we appeal to our humanity, we appeal to our dignity and purpose. We appeal to our great potential, not to make excuses for our shortcomings.

A few years ago, my wife and I took our daughters to see "Sesame Street Live," a theater production based on the children's television show. Once I got passed the fact that I was watching a bunch of people dance around dressed up as giant puppets singing simple songs, I have to admit the storyline was fairly compelling. All the characters of Sesame Street—Grover, Bert, Oscar the Grouch, Big Bird, Abbie Cadabbie—were putting on a play about what they were

going to be when they grew up. Each character performed a musical number based on what they envision their vocation to be. Grover is a policeman, Telly is a cowboy, Bert wants to be a forest ranger. The dramatic tension in the play is provided by the fact that Big Bird can't decide what he's going to be. He listens to everyone else sing about their future job, but he can't decide on one himself. And that's when I fell asleep. My wife had to fill me in when it was over.

We may not be able to settle on a job or a career, but thanks be to God our true vocation is set by Jesus once he steps into that river Jordan. When we, too, are baptized, we are promised we will be like Jesus when we grow up. In those waters, his nature becomes our nature. We become visibly and spiritually part of a Christ who justifies us before God, who represents what humans are created to be. As we are immersed in his death and resurrection, we become a part of that new creation God has begun in him.

We still struggle with sin, no doubt. Like it or now, we still feel the effects, even in our thoughts and actions, of a Creation that does not fully know that sin and death have been defeated by this man. We feel those effects in so many ways, we see them in the world around us. Nevertheless, the baptism that day in the Jordan set in motion a new birth for us. We have been claimed by the Beloved. Because he comes to stand among the sinners in that crowd on the banks of the Jordan, because he hangs in our place on the cross, because he offers his life as a ransom for many, we can stand beside him before God in heaven. We receive our most critical identity from him, that we are beloved children of God, now human in the way that Jesus is human.

My favorite part of a baptism is not actually the part with the water around the font, but the part when we place the oil on the head of the baptized and pray for the Spirit to guide their life. In my tradition the prayer we use is just from part of Isaiah, chapter 11. We pray the person will be given the "spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in God's presence." All of these things are shown in the life of Christ, and if we are able to live them it is because he lives them first. I often tell parents that, if we're honest with ourselves, these are really the types of things we hope for our children as they grow up. People may talk about wanting little Susie or little Tommy to grow up to become a doctor or a lawyer or a pro football player, but when it comes right down to it, no matter what they become as a profession, we really hope and pray they grown up to be like Jesus: wise and understanding, courageous in the face of temptation, and giving in the face of greed. And that they know God loves them and they are joyful in that knowledge. We all want our children and the children of others to be that kind of human. And it what we pray for ourselves, too. It starts right there at our baptism, in the waters where Jesus first meets us. And that is an echo of Jesus' baptism, where he first meets God and hears God's voice.

All things considered, it's quite a beginning, quite a default birthdate, even without all the angels and shepherds and stuff. He lives for us and for the lives that unfold for us. Even if we fall asleep at some points along the way...all things considered...it's quite a glorious and grace-filled show.