

Claiming our Belonging

Mark 1:4-11

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### **Mark 1:4-11**

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

I can't hear this story of Jesus' baptism without thinking about the legendary Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner comedy routine, the 2000 Year Old Man. The part I'm thinking about is when Carl Reiner, interviewing the old man played by Brooks, asks if he always believed in God. The old man says, no, that there used to be a guy in the village who they worshipped. His name was Phil. Phil apparently was a big guy, so tough he could break you apart with his two hands.

"So when did you stop worshipping Phil?" Reiner asks. Brooks' character explains that one day a lightning bolt struck Phil, and as all the villagers gathered around him and saw he was dead, someone said (wide-eyed, I picture), "There is something bigger than Phil."

Similarly, I imagine the people of the Judean countryside, here to be baptized by John, this prophet with special power they had come to follow – big burly John, wearing camel hair and eating locusts, maybe looking a little like Phil. I picture someone from *this* crowd, witnessing this baptism scene on the shores of the Jordan River, and, seeing the heavens open up, responding with wonder, "There's something bigger than John."

The majority of Americans believe there is "something bigger". While the Pew Research Center studies of religion in America over the last five years have revealed that an increasing number of Americans describe themselves as

"spiritual but not religious", the vast majority of us - upwards to 88/89% - say we believe in God.<sup>1</sup> What's not so clear, is the degree to which that belief in God gives comfort, meaning, and direction in one's life. You see, whether or not we believe in God, if that belief remains a far off concept, just another thing you can't see but you believe exists, like gravity or air, it's not life-changing. But rather, when we claim our *belonging* to God, that's when our lives are transformed.

As I've watched people of deep faith live out their lives, whether that looks like a faith that gets one through unimaginable grief and loss, or whether it's faith played out in self-sacrificing acts of giving to others, I've noticed that they each have a deep sense of belonging to God. A deep sense of knowing their connection to their Creator, God-with-us. I've come to the conclusion that if you want to work on your faith, start with your belonging. The life of faith that fuels disciples for our mission in the world, or fuels us through significant challenge and loss, begins with our belonging. Jesus mission, we learn today, began with his. An adoption and belonging sealed in his baptism.

This account of Jesus' baptism from the Gospel of Mark, stands out from the other gospels in one significant way. In Mark there is no account of Jesus' birth, no story of his family's escape to Egypt, nothing on the days of his youth

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/belief-in-god/>

in the synagogue. Mark chooses to start his account of Jesus' life and ministry *here*. For Mark, what happens to Jesus at his baptism is foundational to Jesus' life and ministry. For us as followers, that tells us something about our own.

We sometimes make baptism out to be a peaceful promise and a light splash of water; a gentle dove descending. But this description in Mark is more like a dove dive-bombing than gently descending. This scene is dramatic. God is disruptive. The heavens tear open and God breaks in. The only other time in this gospel when the language of tearing open like this is at the crucifixion, when Jesus breathed his last breath and the "curtain of the temple was torn in two" (Mark 15:38). New Testament scholar Karoline Lewis says it's like God can't take the separation anymore and just has to break in. God wants to be known.

And then God speaks. In our baptisms and throughout our lives, God speaks; because God has no desire to remain hidden. Here God speaks to lay claim, to affirm, and to act. "You are my Son," God says. You belong to me. Jesus in his baptism is claimed by God with unconditional love. And God *affirms* Jesus, you are beloved, "with you I am well pleased." Or, as the Common English Bible translates, "In you I find happiness" (v.11). God who loves and claims and delights in us, not only speaks, God acts. The Spirit comes down on Jesus. God gives power to Jesus for his life of loving and

serving God, a life that will include his suffering, death, and triumph over death.

The timing of Jesus' baptism is important. Before he accomplishes a single miracle, or conversion, or impressive sermon, God claims him as God's own. By God's grace, he belongs. In his baptism Jesus is grafted into and empowered for a larger purpose. Baptism does this. When we are baptized into Christ, we share in this belonging, not because of anything we've accomplished or earned. But because of God's grace. Not only do we share in Christ's belonging, we share in his larger purpose.

The Heidelberg Catechism, one of the confessions of our Presbyterian faith which we will study during Lent, begins with this question: *What is your only comfort in life and in death?* The response is (perhaps some of you can repeat it): *That I belong. That I belong, body and soul in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.*

Claiming this deep sense of belonging, not as some far off aspiration or empty belief, but as a deep sense of connection, changes us. Because when we claim our adoption as children of God, an adoption sealed in our baptism, our lives are given purpose. And our purpose is given power, the same power God bestowed on Jesus that fueled his ministry and raised him from death. We belong to God for a purpose. The response to that Heidelberg question

concludes by declaring, "Therefore, by [God's] Holy Spirit, [God]...makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him."

Reclaiming the belonging of our baptism moves our faith from an accessory of our lives, to the very purpose and meaning of our lives. Experiencing that deep connection to God, in whom "we live and move and have our very being", as Paul says (Acts 17:28), emboldens us for God's purposes. Paul wrote to the Romans that when we are baptized in Christ we are baptized into Christ's death so that "we might walk in the newness of life" (Romans 6:3-4). The vows made at our baptism which we renew today, are vows that reflect that new life. John the baptizer called those to baptism with a call for repentance. In other words, turn from your ways. You are about to made new – new purpose, new power, new life.

Tomorrow we celebrate Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. day. As we look back on King's life and ministry, it's easy to wonder where he got his wisdom and courage. We can question how he kept going despite serious and very real threats to his life and the life of his family. But we, as people of faith, know that there was something bigger than that hate to keep King pursuing justice. Nothing of this world, no power of human origin, could have fueled him to respond with love to the horrific hate and violence he and his people experienced. *We* know that his baptism in Christ and his sense of belonging

claimed in that baptism, gave Martin Luther King's life purpose and filled him with power for that purpose. Today the hatred and bigotry remains. But so does the power of Christ in us. The power of love that will break the bonds of the sin of these injustices.

Today we reaffirm our baptismal vows. We *reclaim* our baptisms. Our lives can easily feel void of meaning. We get caught up in the routines of our days; for some that routine is a rat race, for others monotony. For some that routine includes pain and disappointment. For others it represents regrets, mistakes, or goals not achieved. But this is not what God sees. This is not who God tore open the heavens for. God sees in each of us a beloved child; and in all of us a community of beloved, created and empowered for *God's purposes in the world*. Regardless of what you've done or haven't done, you have purpose today. Our baptisms remind us that in our living and in our dying our lives have meaning. Claiming that is life-changing.

You, my friends, are God's beloved; adopted, affirmed and set free to love and serve your God and your neighbor. Claim that today, and be transformed. May it be so.