

Baptism of the Lord (Mark 1:4-11)

Feb. 18, 2014

4 so John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And the whole Judean region and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." 9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. 11 And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (NRSVUE)

Starting about 35 years ago, I served as a youth pastor for almost ten years. One day, I invited high schoolers to join 'fill-in-the-blank' conversations. (God is _____ because _____.)

"God is solid because God never changes God's mind about taking care of us." Andy said.

"God is water because God makes us feel filled and makes us cool." Jennifer followed.

"God is sky because it's there, but you can never reach it," was Yenni's answer.

"God is air because you can't live without it. Even though you can't see it, it is always there," Jennifer jumped in again.

"God is a roof because God protects us, providing shelter," David also joined.

"God is a rubber band, because no matter how far it stretches it always comes back. God always comes back," Sam, a shy boy, finally answered.

What would be your answer if you were asked to fill in the blank? God is _____ because _____.

One of the best gifts that helps us remember who God is and who we are is baptism. I often share Sam's answer when I facilitate a baptism class: "God is a rubber band, because no matter how far it stretches it always comes back. God always comes back."

Baptism is the gift and the sign of new life in Christ. Baptism is not the end of a journey, but the doorway to the ongoing process of growth and sanctification in grace. According to John Wesley, just like salvation, baptism shouldn't be

understood as a one-time event, but a lifelong journey of growth and transformation by God's grace and guidance.¹ In other words, baptism invites us to a journey, in which God continues to shape us into the people God has created us to be.

Forty days of the Lenten season invite us to grow through prayer, repentance, forgiveness, fellowship, fasting, more loving and being compassionate, working for peace and justice, listening, resting, slowing down.² You can continue to list all of the things that Lent calls upon us to engage, but above all, Lent invites us to concentrate on our baptismal covenant.

Although Lent became a heavily penitential season in medieval times, today's churches are moving towards a renewed understanding of Lent as a time to prepare for baptism or to remember the baptismal covenant.³ The word 'Lent' came from Old English *lencten*, meaning "springtime." Lent is also a season for longing and praying for spiritual springtime for individuals and communities of faith.

Lent began as the final intensive period of preparation for catechumens (candidates for baptism under training) who had been significantly prepared for baptism that would be held during the Easter Vigil. Again, Lenten season is basically about preparation for baptism. If you are not baptized yet, I strongly encourage you to see me, to talk with me anytime, especially in this Lenten season. I believe God has also been waiting for you for a long time.

In today's story, John the baptizer was surrounded by a crowd from near and far. In the wilderness by the Jordan River, they were eager to be baptized by John. It was a baptism of life-change that leads to forgiveness of sins.⁴ John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. By today's standards, he wore eco-friendly clothing and ate healthy food.

It was not the end of the story. John 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

¹ Gayle C. Felton, *This Gift of Water: The Practice and Theology of Baptism Among Methodists in America*.

² It is also important to be reminded that congregations should not "exhaust themselves" by becoming busy "through a series of events, classes, services, and busy work only to collapse the day after Easter"-- "Rather, the discipline of Lent should sustain and refresh [them] so that [they] may give full expression to church commitments through the great Easter-Pentecost Season." See *The Christian Handbook of the Christian Year* written by four most influential liturgical scholars (James White, Laurence Stookey, Don Saliers, Hoyt Hickman) of The United Methodist Church.

³ Ruth C. Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God*; James White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*.

⁴ *The Message*.

sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” John believed that baptism by him would turn people’s old life into a new life, but Jesus’ baptism—a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit—would more profoundly change the baptized from the inside out.

At this time, Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee appeared. He was also baptized by John in the Jordan. The moment Jesus came out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart (or “the sky split open,” depending on translations). And God’s Spirit came down on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you, I am well pleased.” For Mark, all of this shows the true identity of Jesus, suggesting that Jesus is the suffering servant of God who will bring salvation to all God’s beloved. As the heavens were torn apart right after the baptism of Jesus, when Jesus died on the cross, the Temple curtain was torn in two from top to bottom (MK 15:38). In both baptism and the crucifixion of Jesus, the curtain was opened between God and creation, allowing us open access to God’s presence.⁵

What a wonderful story, revealing how God works intimately and cosmically in and through Jesus Christ for the world and beyond! As the baptism of Jesus manifested his true identity, the baptism of believers confirms our identity as God’s beloved.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. Starting this past Wednesday, we began our forty-day journey of Lent. Forty days, but if you count the days of Lent in your calendar, you can find that it is forty-six days, not forty days. Why? Because the six Sundays are not included in Lent. Every Sunday is a weekly little Easter—the day to celebrate the Resurrection. That’s why we call Sundays during the Lenten season “Sundays *in* Lent” not “Sundays *of* Lent.” “Sundays *in* Lent” remains as the Lord’s Day of Joy even during the penitential Lenten season.⁶

One of the practical dilemmas is that Sunday worship is the only opportunity for many worshipers to reflect on Lent. How can we maintain a healthy balance in this dilemma? It is Lent, and it is the Lord’s Day. Today, along with a purple Lenten altar set, we intentionally placed a white pulpit scarp that reminds us today is also the day of Resurrection. I personally consider Sundays in Lent as the heart of our congregational observance of Lent, while not forgetting that every Sunday of the year is a weekly little Easter.

⁵ *Interpretation.*

⁶ *New Handbook of the Christian Year; Stookey, Calendar; White, Introduction to Christian Worship.*

This Lent, I invite you to practice two things. First, I strongly invite you to read Philippians (Ch. 1-4) over and over again. Second, if you are not baptized yet or not a member of Swift Memorial, please come and see me. I look forward to having some conversations about it.

In and through baptism and our ongoing faith journey, God's grace abounds. God calls us daughters and sons, the beloved. On this day of the baptism of the Lord I would also like to invite you to remember your own baptismal affirmation.

Please say 'I do' when I ask you some questions. If you are not baptized yet, you are still welcome to answer, 'I do.'

On behalf of the whole Church, I ask you:

Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness,
reject the evil powers of this world,
and repent of your sin?

I do.

Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you
to resist evil, injustice, and oppressions
in whatever forms they present themselves?

I do.

Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior,
put your whole trust in his grace,
and promise to serve him as your Lord,
in union with the Church which Christ has opened
to people of all ages, nations, and races?

I do.

According to the grace given to you,
will you remain *faithful members* of Christ's holy Church
and serve as Christ's *representatives* in the world?

I will.

We are in the wilderness. Let us not be discouraged but encouraged, waiting for the Word birthing amid our barren hearts and life circumstances. Merciful and compassionate God, help us to follow the example of Jesus' great humility and patience in this Lenten season. Help us speak the truth humbly and courageously without losing the heart of loving kindness. We pray in the name of Jesus, who embodied your self-giving love. Amen!