

Sermon Text – Sunday, February 18, 2024 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: Genesis 8:8-17; 2nd Reading: I Peter 3:18-22
Scripture for Message: Mark 1:9-15 “Water”

John’s baptism was for repentance of sin, yet Jesus came to be baptized by him. Jesus was without sin or blemish, the perfect lamb – yet he submitted to John’s baptism in the Jordan River. There is richness of symbolism in our scripture readings this morning and a lot for us to consider and explore.

The waters of the river Jordan are a significant symbol to explore. Is it incidental that John baptized in that particular river? Sure, although it’s location was convenient there is a symbolic significance to that location that dates back to Moses’ time. This river marked the separation of the nation’s wilderness wanderings and the land God promised to Abraham and his descendants. When the people reached this point there was one last task for them, cross over and take possession of their inheritance. There was a parting of waters in the river Jordan that although similar to the parting of the Red Sea held much more divine significance. The Red Sea was parted using Moses’ staff, a miracle in itself, but the waters of the river Jordan were parted when the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant entered the water. The Ark was where God resided among the people, it was the throne from which God spoke to Moses – this fact is significant in the history of the river Jordan. God entered those waters once and they separated for him. Jesus entered them a second time at his baptism and the heavens separated.

It is significant that Jesus began his ministry at a time when fear would drive the average person away, he was tempted by Satan when wandering in the wilderness for forty days, his relative John the Baptist, a cousin of his mother, was arrested and there was widespread persecution of Jews by the Roman authorities. Jesus had the confidence given him at baptism when a voice from heaven tore open the skies and proclaimed, “you are my Son, with you I am well pleased.”

Jesus’ baptism represented obedience to God the father and submission to the father’s will. You can read in our scripture that Jesus’ baptism pleased God. The pronouncement that God was “well pleased” came as the “heavens were torn apart” not like what you see in the movies. This was not a gentle parting of the clouds with a white dove gently landing on Jesus shoulder. Mark describes this as an earth shattering event and ‘like a dove’ the spirit came into Jesus. This pronouncement to Jesus as the Son of God signified a ripping away of the old order of things, maybe a foreshadowing of Jesus’ crucifixion when the temple curtain was torn apart. Like Jesus teaching and preaching in the synagogue, this was something new.

Notice that in Mark's Gospel this voice from heaven, is directed to Jesus alone. "You are my Son, with you I am well pleased." Mark reinforces this as something only a few will become aware of when Jesus silences the demons who "know him." Some might question whether Jesus' himself knew his true identity as the Son of God before this moment. But in Matthew's Gospel we have read that Jesus knew himself to be the Son of the Father at an early age. His baptism was significant as the beginning of his ministry, but his awareness of self was with him from the beginning of his life.

After he emerged from the waters of the river Jordan, and after the Spirit entered him, the Spirit "immediately" drove him into the wilderness. He wasn't in the wilderness alone, he was accompanied by wild beasts, angels, and by Satan. Mark tells us that Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days and was tempted by Satan. We are not told the nature of Jesus' temptations although we learn of that in Matthew's Gospel – let's forget them for a moment. This was the beginning of the struggle between the power of God through Jesus and the power of Satan and the lesser demons Jesus encounters in Mark's Gospel. The Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness and some consider Satan's temptations as the Spirit's way to test Jesus resolve for the work he is about to begin. I wonder though, could this be God's way of testing Satan's domain through Jesus. Maybe the point was to "show Satan who's boss." With Satan's inability to "tempt" Jesus, a crack formed in Satan's power and with each subsequent exorcism, Jesus chipped away at Satan's kingdom until God defeated Satan and evil once for all with Jesus' resurrection.

Mark next tells us that the Roman authorities arrested John the Baptizer, he does not say at once and maybe that is allowing space for Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. We don't know, however, how much time transpired. Jesus, it seems waited until John's arrest, a completion of his ministry, before going to Galilee to proclaim the good news of God. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe." God waited long enough, the time is now, the defeat of Satan's domain has begun, repent and believe.

This is a fitting scripture for the first Sunday in Lent – "the time is fulfilled" but there is much work yet to do. Lent stands for forty days of reflection on Jesus surrendering himself to God's will and it is a time of sacrifice and practice of spiritual disciplines. The forty days of Lent represent the forty years the people wandered in the wilderness after the Exodus, it enables us to recall their stumbling and grumbling in rebellion and distrust, yet God never abandoned them. These forty days also enable us to recall Jesus own temptations in the wilderness and his struggle with the forces of evil, Jesus however was not abandoned, the Spirit remained with him, and he was attended by Angels.

This time of year is also a good time for each of us to reflect on our own baptisms and our commitments to Christ. Maybe I have baptism on my mind because we recently did a baptism in our sanctuary, and I was inspired. Raise your hand if you remember your own baptism. I remember mine as an important event in my life. I was serious about wanting to dedicate my life to God, it took a while for me to flesh out that commitment and then to be immersed in those waters was special for me. What strikes me now is that I don't think it was that special to the 'minister' who performed that sacrament for me – I think it was just another routine as a busy pastor. I don't want that to be my attitude toward one who comes to me for baptism.

I don't think we take baptism very seriously anymore. It is for the Christian person a public display of faith and obedience. Just as it was for Jesus, an illustration of obedience and submission to God the father. I can't say that baptism is punching your ticket into heaven, I wonder if there are as many unbaptized people headed for an eternity with Jesus as there are baptized headed for an eternity in Satan's domain. Baptism is not salvation, it is symbolic of our salvation, it is symbolic of our being 'buried with Christ' and risen to walk with him in new life. And maybe that is why baptism does not get the "publicity" it used to receive when most of us were younger. I've been minister here for six years and have performed three baptisms – that's not many.

I mentioned earlier the sacredness of the waters of the River Jordan. When you think about it, water is eternal not re-created through growth but has existed since the beginning of time, recycled through evaporation and precipitation, absorbed into the earth and springing up again. The very same waters Jesus entered for his baptism, are the waters that baptized you and me. The eternal waters that were present at the very beginning of creation will remain throughout the life cycle of creation. I don't know about you but that inspires me to think of the sacredness of baptism. Not only do we, through baptism, illustrate our commitment to become children of God – we do so in the very same waters that God made sacred at creation.

At Jesus baptism the heavens tore apart and a voice from heaven claimed Jesus as "my Son with whom I am well pleased." This tearing open of heaven signified something new. For us, God enacts a spiritual transformation through our baptism. Through our expression of faith at baptism we illustrate our salvation from an old way of being and are raised into a new way of being. The Disciples church recognizes that baptism is a spiritual liberation, a transformation of the soul, a receiving of grace. We are no longer living in darkness, Jesus the light of the world has made us one with the whole people of God.

That is the significance of John the Baptist's way of baptizing for repentance. At our baptism we too express a repentance of our old way of living, our sins of the past life and we express our belief in Jesus as the Son of the Living God, proclaiming him Lord and Savior of the world and of our lives. Disciples believe that the baptismal ceremony marks the line between the church and the world – it is our voluntary testimony of faith in Christ.

Our scriptures this morning remind us of waters – flood waters, waters of creation, baptismal waters. We are also reminded of covenant, promises God made to us, to creation. In Genesis we read about the covenant God made with Noah to never again cause flood waters to destroy the earth, a covenant that was sealed with a rainbow. In our reading from I Peter, the writer reminds us of that and ties it to the new covenant Jesus established with his death and resurrection. Through our baptism we recognize that covenant as being significant in our lives; our baptism is a way of sealing that promise in each of us. Each week we remember God's promises and Jesus' new covenant established in the shedding of his blood for us, once for all.

During this period of Lent, we are going to do more than just remember our baptism. We are going to take time to recall Jesus ministry, which began at his baptism. We are going to recall his struggle with the world's forces: demonic possessions, people stricken with illness and injury and Jesus receiving them for healing and blessing. In the Disciples tradition, Lent is a time of repentance and self-examination. Lent is a time for spiritual discipline, typically a Christian will practice fasting or self-denial. But we are going to see that Lent is about more than giving up chocolate or alcohol. We will see Jesus leaving the crowds to pray, we will hear Jesus talk about his own death and suffering to come. And through all of this we will be reminded of God's presence with Jesus and with us. We will be reminded of the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the blessings that are available to us when we repent and believe.