

January 10, 2021

“Remember Your Baptism”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Mark1:4-11

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Today, throughout Christendom, we celebrate Baptism of the Lord Sunday. And over the past almost seven years I've been your pastor, I've preached many times about baptism and the importance of remembering your baptism. And then I would walk up and down the aisles of this sanctuary (and the chapel), and sprinkle baptismal water on you, encouraging you to “remember your baptism,” and telling you that “you are a beloved child of God, and his Holy Spirit is upon you.” This year, however, it obviously has to be different. You may not be able to feel the water fall on you, but know still that you are a beloved child of God and his Holy Spirit is upon you. Remember that! Despite the pandemic, despite the protest and anger out there, despite the hardships, despite being separated from family and friends, despite the fact we're not here together, always remember – you are a beloved child of God and the Holy Spirit is upon you. That thought alone should be all we need to calm us and comfort us, and help us know that all is well.

Yet, so often we seem to forget that fact. Especially during these strange and stressful times when we are distracted by so many things of this world. And when we forget, our faith can easily falter. Oh, it might not be obvious, but it falters, and the way we think and act changes. Let me share a story. “In the woods surrounding a monastery, a rabbi lived in a small hut. Occasionally, the monks would see the rabbi walking in the woods, and they would say, almost hypnotically to one another, “the rabbi is walking in the woods today.” Now the abbot of the monastery was greatly distraught about the change he was seeing – the decline of his holy community. The monks were distracted by so many worldly things, distracted by so many unimportant things. He had prayed and pondered over the situation and admonished the mood and behavior of the monks. All to no avail. One day he saw the rabbi walking in the woods and decided to ask his advice. He walked up behind the rabbi. The rabbi turned, and when the abbot and the rabbi faced one another, both of them began to weep. The sorrow of the situation affected them deeply. The abbot knew he did not have to explain the decline of the monastery. He merely asked, “Can you offer me some advice that will help the monastery thrive again?” The rabbi answered, “One of you is filled with God's Holy Spirit. Only one of you.” Then he turned and continued to walk in the woods. The abbot returned to the monastery. The monks had seen him talking to the rabbi who walks in the woods, and they asked, “What did the rabbi say to you?” “That only just one of us is filled with God's Holy Spirit,” the abbot said slowly, almost incredulously. “Just one of us.”

The monks began talking to one another. Just one of us? Which one? Is it Brother John? Is it Brother Andrew? Is it Brother Lawrence? Could it be the abbot? No one knew. But the monks began to look for God's Holy Spirit in one another, and they listened to each other's words for God's voice. They listened for words of faith and joy and hope and love. And things began to change among the monks. Soon, this new holy aura at the monastery became known outside its walls. Soon, many new monks joined the community and people from all over came to the monastery for spiritual solace and direction. God's Holy Spirit was everywhere! And, occasionally, some were fortunate enough to see a rabbi walking in the woods.¹

Now to me, that rabbi walking in the woods sounds an awful lot like John the Baptist in the wilderness. Let me explain. Sometimes when we sin, or fall short, or get distracted from prayer or our devotions or regular worship of God – the Holy Spirit is nowhere to be found. And so, we need to get to a place where there are no distractions. Because distractions like the pandemic, like the political and social unrest we see, like all the day to day issues we have to contend with – all those things take us away from what is sacred and holy. And I think John the Baptist knew that all too well. Because did you ever wonder why John was out in the wilderness, in the first place. After all, the Bible clearly tells us that his father, Zechariah, was a Temple priest. And his mother, Elizabeth, was a direct descendant of Aaron, Moses' brother, and the first high priest of the Jewish people. Yet so politically corrupt and spiritually suspect was the hierarchy of the Temple at that time, that even John's father, Zechariah, had the – and I'll use the Jewish term here – he had the chutzpa, to directly question and doubt the angel Gabriel. Is it any wonder then that John went into the wilderness to get away from all that? To remove himself from all his distractions. And when those Pharisees and Sadducees tried to follow him there, he chased them away by calling them “a brood of vipers.” You see, John realized, and wants us to realize, that in the end, it's all about our relationship with God. The things of this world won't matter. That's why our thinking must be clear and prioritized when it comes to our faith. Our lives must be uncluttered, and our focus on things holy, on living righteously. That's why John implores us to repent and get rid of the sins, the baggage and the distractions we carry.

Now all four gospels tell of the baptism of Jesus. Yet many people wonder why Jesus was baptized in the first place. Some of the questions theologians and lay persons have asked go like this... Was John the Baptizer greater at the time than Jesus who was baptized? No. As I've said before, John was the

¹ Wisdom Tales From Around the World, Unknown Origin

messenger, Jesus was the Message. Did baptism take away Jesus' sins? No, he had none. Did Jesus' baptism sanctify the use of water as the element for our baptism? No, water is part of the rite of baptism and a symbol that we are washed clean of our sins. Did Jesus become the "Son of God" through his baptism? No. He already was. So then, what was the purpose of Jesus baptism? Well, I like to look at Jesus' baptism the way St. Matthew 's gospel explains it, using Jesus' own words, "To fulfill all righteousness." To fulfill all righteousness. You see, righteousness is an attribute of God's that is revealed through his laws and by his love. It is an attribute of all that is good, all that is right. And when God's Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove, and on us through our baptism, that righteousness became God's gift to you and me, his children. St. Paul tells us in Romans, "Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by our faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. Christ has brought us to this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we can confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us his Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love." See, I told you we needed to remember our baptism. Because it's really all about God's love for us. You and me, his children.

Now one of the many things I find interesting in our scripture, which is in fact found in all four gospel stories is the symbolism of the dove. We heard today, "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 upon him. (Like a dove.) And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" I love hearing those words of the Almighty to Jesus. I hope one day to hear those same words of the Almighty spoken to me. I'm sure you do too. But back to my point, did you ever wonder why God's Holy Spirit is depicted as a dove? Today, we think of a dove as a symbol of peace. Back then however, even though the Roman Empire was coming to the pinnacle of its power, Greek influence in the civilized world was very widespread. And doves were associated with the Greek goddess of love, Aphrodite. So I suspect the gospel writers could best call attention to their point about God's love for us, filling us completely, through that symbol of a dove, love, coming upon us.

But there's more. At that time, there was only one Bible. That being what we refer to today as the Old Testament, with all its stories and inferences regarding the coming of a Messiah. As theologian John Shea writes, "Jesus' coming out of the waters and the descending of the dove might allude to the story

of Noah. In that story, a dove symbolized the first messenger of a new beginning. After the flood that destroyed the sinfulness of the earth, Noah's ark, with its cargo of living things floated on the water for weeks waiting for the water to recede and a new earth to emerge. After a time, Noah sent out a dove. The first time he did this, the dove returned, 'finding no place to set its foot.' The second time Noah sent out the dove, it returned with an olive branch in its beak. Land was somewhere! The third time Noah sent out the dove, it did not return, and Noah knew that the earth had emerged and the dove had found a place to nest. The earth re-emerging meant a new covenant between God and humankind. After the removal of sin by the flood, the promise of new life had arrived. And so, the Holy Spirit coming upon Jesus as a dove, extends the meaning of the Noah story. Jesus now heralds in a new covenant. Through him, the earth will emerge out of the waters of sin just as Jesus has emerged out of the water of the Jordan." May this be true for us and for our world. Remembering "We have been made right with God because of what Jesus Christ has done for us. For we know how dearly God loves us."

Sisters and brothers, on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, may you set aside your distractions, and remember your baptism. Remember you are a beloved child of God, and his Holy Spirit of love rests upon you. Go, and live in that love. Amen