

## **Baptism: Water and Spirit**

Genesis 1:1-5 **Mark 1:4-11**

The story is told of a young boy who was baptized. When he was asked afterwards what he was thinking when the minister sprinkled the water on his head said, “He forgot to comb my hair.”

While this opening chapter of Mark is primarily about Jesus’ baptism and accompanying revelation of who Jesus is and the initiation of his ministry, none-the-less it is also at least secondarily about our own baptism. On this day that when we remember Jesus’ baptism, let us remember and meditate upon our own baptism. This is particularly important since many of us were probably baptized as infants or as very young children and we may not consciously remember our actual baptism.

In Mark’s gospel John the Baptist is doing his thing out in the River Jordan. People flocked to him from all around to hear him proclaim “a baptism for forgiveness of sins. Hundreds, if not thousands of people were convinced of their sinfulness and came forward to receive baptism, to have their sins washed away. Then as now, this message touches hearts and souls in need of forgiveness. Let’s face it, who among is not guilty of something, indeed if we are honest, we are guilty of many things, both sins of commission and sins of omission. But this is not the whole Christian story. Something is missing. John tells the people, **“I have baptized you with water; but he [Jesus] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”**

What is baptism? What is it all about? There was a time when the church declared that a person had to have their sins washed away by baptism to experience eternal life and avoid the fires of hell. Newborn babies that were dying were said to need baptism or they would go to hell if they died.

In this view we were all considered to have born with the stain of Adam and Eve's sinfulness. The human condition, even before one could consciously make decisions and be responsible for one's actions was said to be in need of redemption.

Happily we seemed to have moved a bit beyond this at this stage of human history. Sin is certainly still very real and effects all our lives but I have to say that personally I can't imagine a newborn baby being condemned to hell just because it hadn't been baptized.

In the early church since baptism was viewed primarily as being about forgiveness of sin and that once one was baptized you were suppose to avoid sinning, many adopted some very strange approaches to baptism. It is said that Constantine, the emperor who made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, put off baptism until he was on his death bed. He figured that it was safe to be baptized then because since he was dying he would not have time to commit any more sins and somehow ruin or nullify his baptism! Somehow I think he was missing some very important points about what the purpose of baptism is.

Both of these misunderstandings of baptism grow out of an over emphasis on baptism for remission of sin. The first comes from an overemphasis on the idea of original inborn sinfulness prior to baptism. The second comes from an overemphasis on humankind's inability to break away from sinning before or after baptism.

In our passage from Acts Paul arrives in Ephesus and finds some Christians. He asks them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They quite honestly reply that no they hadn't. Paul diagnosis's the problem as being an incomplete baptism. They had only

been baptized for forgiveness of sins, baptized into “John’s baptism.” It seems they had never even heard of the Holy Spirit!

Immediately Paul laid his hands on them and invoked the Holy Spirit on them. We are told that they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. Now lest anyone become worried that they haven’t spoken in tongues or taken up prophesying let us remember Paul’s words in Galatians 5:22 **“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. ... And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.”** Even this is not a comprehensive list of the fruits of the Spirit. Two things are key here “belonging to Christ Jesus” and being “guided by the Spirit.”

Episcopal priest and author, Robert Farrar Capon, points out in his book *An Offering of Uncles*, that, **“In English, the words, *person, parson and priest* near neighbors: they share the same footage of fence in the backyard of usage. Enough at any rate, to suggest that somebody has already caught the hint that both parson and person are up to the same thing – that both are priests, offerers. The definition of man as a person, and of a person as a priestly agent within history, ....”** (p. 107)

One of the basis things that the Protestant churches teach is “the priesthood of all believers.” It is not just ordained types, like myself, who make offerings to God at the altar. As Protestants we believe that each and every one of us offers up to God on the altar of life our lives and actions, each and every day.

Baptism marks the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, his offering of his life. While his death on the cross represents the pinnacle of his self-offering to God and humanity, this offering began long before his crucifixion. This

offering began with his baptism. From that moment on Jesus walked with God and sought to serve both God and neighbor. From the moment of his baptism Jesus led a “sacramental life.”

In *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV for Year B* commentators make an important point, ***“The baptism of Jesus provides the occasion for the revelation of his identity in vs. 10-11, which in turn prompts Jesus’ journey into the wilderness and the beginning of his ministry. The baptism becomes the setting in which the revelation occurs, not its cause.”*** This last point is worth repeating, **“The baptism becomes the setting in which the revelation occurs, not its cause.”**

That makes me think about our own baptisms. Baptism is not magic. The sprinkling of water and invoking of words by the minister do not in and of themselves forgive our sins and initiate us into the Body of Christ, into Christ’s life, death and resurrection. Only God, the Holy Spirit can do that. As with all sacraments, baptism is an outward physical sign of an inward spiritual grace. Baptism is an opportunity for us to reach out towards God and for God to manifest God’s hopes and dreams for us and the world.

The voice that Jesus hears at his baptism tells him, **“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”** Now certainly none of us can claim to be God’s Son in the way that Jesus can, but the Bible reminds us that through Christ we are joint heirs with Jesus. We are brothers and sisters in Christ and all children of God.

I hear echoes of Genesis in this announcement to Jesus. In Genesis 1 every time God creates something God says “it is good.” The first word of creation is not “original sin” but “original goodness,” “original blessing,” as Matthew Fox likes to put it. Baptism is an opportunity to affirm this. Later in chapter two of Genesis we are told that Adam and Eve were created to

“till and keep the earth.” Later still in Genesis we are told that we are to be our brother and sisters “keeper.” We are reminded that we are to make offerings to God, to honor God with our lives. Special ritual moments, like baptism, are not meant to be separate from life. They are meant to be moments of “clarity” signifying what life is suppose to be all about. They are moments when God can speak to us words of encouragement, reminder, and direction. They are reminders that we are to lead “sacramental lives,” in which we offer up to God and neighbor our very best.

A final word from Robert Farrar Capon, *“The ultimate mystery of personality – of personhood – is that no person exists for his own sake. As a matter of fact, it is precisely my own welfare that is the last thing in the world I am to be concerned with. The priest is to spend his [or her] days offering for others: the Good Shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. The beholding, the loving – the adoration, if you will – of my own being is somebody else’s business, not mine. Persons were meant to enter into a dance of mutual oblation, a simultaneous offering of each other.”* (p. 115)

Amen!