

Marked For Life

1 – Following Jesus For Life

Genesis 1:1-10

Psalm 29

Mark 1:1, 4-15

January 8, 2012

Baptism of the Lord Sunday

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So Christmas is over, the New Year begun, and it's time to get back to normal, right? Wrong, according to the Gospel. Christmas begins a new creation, a new life for you and me and the whole world, since Jesus came there is no getting back to good old days of ordinary normal ever again. As Mark announces, following Jesus' baptism and temptation, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news."

Something radically new and different and good began when Jesus became flesh and blood among us. On Christmas Eve we sang the songs of the angels with the shepherds and the wise men. We lit our candles and declared the coming of a light which the darkness could not put out, a light which would enlighten the heart of every person. But then we packed our crèches and tree ornaments away, and offered that tree up to the land fill. As W. H. Auden put it in his "Christmas Oratorio," "Once again, as in previous years, we have seen the actual Vision and failed to do more than entertain it as an Agreeable Possibility."

Yet as Mark tells the Gospel story of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Mark does not begin with a birth narrative but with a simple short comprehensive announcement, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," a statement short, succinct, immense in its implications. No sheep or camels, or star in the sky for Mark, just that terse announcement. Then fast forward 30 years to the beginning of Jesus' public ministry as he submits to baptism at the hands of his cousin John.

No, there is no getting back to ordinary normal as the Gospel writers tell the story. The coming of the Wise Men is traditionally celebrated on January 6, the day of Epiphany. Epiphany means revealing or manifestation. And the wise seekers coming from foreign pagan lands to worship the Christ Child and outfox that fox Herod symbolizes the light of the savior of all the world, spreading to the world beyond the Jews, the world of the Gentiles, you and me. And no earthly ruler, no Herod, no Caesar, no President, no Premier, no great leader, could suppress the spreading of this light, the expansion of this good news, which now today in 2012 finds more who believe it who profess "Jesus Is Lord" around the world than at any other time in history.

Early on the message reached Rome, Capital of the Empire. It is from Rome that the Gospel of Mark was most likely written. It is to Rome, Christian congregations emerging out of the foundations of the Jewish Synagogues there that Mark is addressed. Mark is considered to be the earliest written gospel, and the shortest. Here not many of Jesus' teachings, such as the Sermon on the Mount or the Sermon on the Plain are found in Matthew and in Luke. Here Jesus is constantly in action, healing lepers and stilling storms. Here the Son of God is always on the

move. Mark is written for disciples living in hostile places not receptive to the message, places like Rome. As Paul Minear observes,

“Mark wrote his Gospel so that the wealth of the gospel’s meaning and the depth of its power might be made more accessible to the Christians in Rome.”ⁱ

Mark is not only the shortest, it is also the most quick paced of the four Gospels. 42 times in the Gospel the author begins a story with, “Immediately.” Mark is the Gospel of Immediacy. Jesus has come. This Gospel is upon us. Now is the time to repent and believe, here, now, immediately.

While the Gospel is essentially anonymous, Mark is thought to have been written by John Mark, the sometime companion of Paul and Peter, from whom Paul separated while Barnabas continued with Mark. Paul, you see, was upset because Mark did not show up in Pamphylia and did not accompany them on that mission. Acts tells the ugly story of separation, “The disagreement (between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark) became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and set out through Syria and Cilicia.”ⁱⁱ

It is because of Barnabas, whose name means, “Son of Encouragement” that Mark is given another chance, receives encouragement and comes to Rome with Barnabas, and meets Peter. In Rome Mark is thought to have become the scribe and assistant to Peter. The essence of Mark is thus considered to be largely the stories remembered by Peter and written down by John Mark.

So Mark begins his account with this announcement of Jesus Christ as the Son of God by showing us Jesus coming to the River Jordan for baptism. The same River Jordan is where Israel crossed over from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land long ago, after 40 years of wandering. “Now in those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.” John had been undertaking a rag-tag renewal ministry out in the wilderness, calling people to repentance and offering them baptism as a sign of the new life people were beginning on the other side of their repentance of sins. Most who came were ordinary small town and country folk who knew the meaning of suffering under the mighty force of Rome. They knew what it meant to live under a tyrant, and they came to hear this wild preacher named John who called them to a new and different life of freedom – and promised them victory over every tyrant and every form of tyranny.

One day John looks up and there is his cousin Jesus standing in the sinners line, waiting to go down into the murky water. I have had the opportunity to visit the state of Bihar, India, poorest state in that vast country, and observe baptisms in the Ganges River where the ashes of cremated Hindus are placed. Conducted by our friend Punraj, I have watched hundreds of young Indian men and women, most of them in their early 20’s, coming from lower class untouchables castes in the Indian culture where they have been told all their lives they can never rise out of their assigned fates given them by this caste. But hearing the Good News of the Gospel, new life in Jesus Christ, worth, value, dignity, forgiveness through Christ, eternal life through Christ,

these young people come and go down under the waters, and rise up as new creations in Christ. The last time I was there I observed 50 or 60 of them, having professed their faith, standing patiently in line waiting to receive the sign, the mark of Christian baptism. From that mystical Indian river of death, they received the sign of new life in Jesus Christ.

Baptism is the visible sacramental sign of our identity – our mark as followers of the Triune God through Jesus Christ. Baptism is our public announcement of faith in Him, our branding, our being tattooed. And Jesus himself, the sinless one, who needed no cleansing from sin, nevertheless begins his public work by fully identifying with us and joining us in receiving baptism.

We all begin our Christian journey through baptism, whether we receive it as infants coming in our parents' arms or as adults coming on our own profession. Worldwide, for 2000 years, baptism has marked our beginning in something new and radically different from the world around us; our beginning in the Christian life. And like Christmas, Baptism is not an end in itself but the beginning, the initiation, of a life long journey.

In early December we gathered here to give thanks for the 95 years of life of our beloved Idamae Mason. This authentic "Rosie the Riveter" was a vital part of South Highland for over 60 years. A master seamstress, she had hand stitched our beautiful white funeral pall, that cloth that is placed over the casket and symbolizes the completion of one's baptism in death and resurrection. What is begun in baptism is completed only through death and resurrection. It was especially touching that this pall which Idamae had sewn for her church family which had covered the caskets of so many dear South Highland saints over the years, that day covered her own casket. And we began her service, as we begin all our services of witness to the resurrection, saying,

"For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

In her baptism Idamae was clothed with Christ; in the day of Christ's coming she shall be clothed with glory."

Baptism marks initiation into a liberating system of freedom through faith altogether different from that of the world. At Belmont Abbey College in North Carolina there is a baptismal font carved out of a stone that once served as an auction block for slaves. The font is inscribed with these words, "On this rock slaves were once traded and sold. From this rock, people are now baptized and set free in Christ."ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus begins his ministry by submitting to baptism, thus modeling for us how we all are to begin this journey into freedom.

Now any baptism is a particularly moving event as family and friends gather round, as the church affirms support and assumes our share in the responsibility. And if Bob Hunter is the assisting elder there is always a surprise or two. But no baptism has ever been quite so surprising as Jesus'. Three amazing things take place. You have heard of lights, action, camera, well this is sight, sound and sending. As he comes up out of the waters of the Jordan, there are three amazing responses.

I

First - sights. Upon his baptism, coming up out of the waters “Jesus saw the heaven’s torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.”^{iv} Wow, it doesn’t get more dramatic than this. Heaven meets earth in this baptism, as the Holy Spirit comes down upon Jesus.

Once, Rev. Jack Ruffin who had baptized me as an infant in Camden, Arkansas and who had been our former pastor Dr. Frank Alexander’s roommate in Edinburgh, Scotland, during their graduate doctoral studies, was filling the pulpit for me in Monroe, LA. Jack had retired from Houston, TX to Natchez, MS and again attended the church where he grew up that Denny and Noelle Read our former Associates, now co-pastor. Jack had driven the 90 miles over to Monroe to fill in for me while I was away. I had told folks that Jack was the pastor who had baptized me, and it was reported that he began his sermon that Sunday saying, “It’s true. I did it. If it didn’t take, don’t blame me!”

Well, Jesus’ baptism certainly did take. In a dramatic epiphany or manifestation right there in the middle of the Jordan, God rips open the doors of heaven and comes down. The longing of Isaiah for which we prayed through Advent, “Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down,” is suddenly fulfilled.^v Jesus sees this opening, and this coming of the spirit upon him, and it serves as confirmation to him of his task and destiny. God is now uniquely at work in and through and upon him in the aftermath of this baptism.

II

Second - sounds. Jesus hears a voice from heaven saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” If ever over his 30 young years Jesus had doubts about who he was or what he was called to do, it is all cleared up with this voice. Here is a sound like unto the creation of the world itself when God spoke light and water and land, creation - itself into being. Now God speaks again, and the Son is validated and assured for the task before him.

And just what is that task? It is to embrace the sins of all the world on a cross. It is to suffer, this innocent young carpenter, this powerful God-man, for your sins and mine. It is, through his death on a cross, to achieve a victory over death itself, and thereby establish his foothold on this created now redeemed world through his new community the Church. The Church right there in Rome, right here in Birmingham. In this baptism we see all this beginning, the Triune God made visible and interacting; the Voice of the Father from heaven, the Holy Spirit seen as a dove descending on the Son of God Jesus Christ, three in one, vibrantly and dynamically at work from the very beginning of creation as Genesis records it, and now vibrantly and dynamically at work from the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry. “You are my son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased.”

III

Sights, Sounds, and third - Sending. All that lies ahead now begins, as we come to the first of Mark’s 42 *immediatels*. “The Spirit *immediately* drove him out into the wilderness.” Jesus in Mark is constantly on the road, on the move, on the go. And from his public confirming

of his identity he is immediately set to his task, and thrust into battle with evil. The work for which he has come begins, as he stands against the devil and his temptations. Mark does not record the nature of these temptations, but Matthew does, as Jesus is tempted by Satan to “super-man-like” step outside the orbit around the Father and the Spirit by commanding stones to become bread, by leaping from the top of the temple, and by receiving all the kingdoms of the world, if he will only worship the devil instead of God. Jesus resists all this, and the battle is on.

I believe the year 2011 will go down in history as the year of overturning tyrants. It began with the overthrow of a Pharaoh-like tyrant in Egypt Hosni Mubarak. It included the overthrow of Libya’s tyrant Khadafy and the death of terrorist Osama bin Laden. It ended with the death and massive mourning in the closed society of North Korea of the tyrant Kim Jong-Il. Millions stood weeping at the death of the man they called their Great Leader, who had kept them repressed, impoverished and under his iron grip, shut off the rest of the world. It is amazing how these closed totalitarian societies are opening up, in Egypt, in Libya, in Iraq, some of them quite suddenly, as people discover the power of their freedom. We will have to wait and see about North Korea.

We saw the struggle between good and evil, freedom and tyranny in the final Harry Potter movie, where Harry now grown does battle with his arch enemy Lord Voldemort. The evil tyrant has apparently slain Harry and the forces of good seem to be undone. Only, when Harry dies, he finds himself at the King’s Cross Subway Station in London where he learns he is protected by his mother’s blood, and does not actually die. What does die, however, is the part of Voldemort, the evil one, which is inside of Harry and which Harry needs to kill before Voldemort can be defeated. Then Harry’s apparent victory over death emboldens and encourages people in their fight against evil.^{vi}

It is like that in baptism. Not a sweet little ceremony for babies but a cleansing sign of a lifelong struggle, a battle against evil, and a promise of ultimate victory through the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Some years ago when Tom Landry was still the famed coach of the Dallas Cowboys, the President of Cerritos Jr. College in California was in Dallas and met with Landry. As a memento of his visit, Tom Landry gave him a Dallas Cowboys t-shirt. Several months later, the college president was back in California playing a round of golf and he was wearing that shirt. The young man who was caddying for him became ecstatic when he saw this man wearing that Dallas Cowboys shirt. “Oh, Sir”, he said, “Are you the coach of the Dallas Cowboys?” For some strange reason the college president replied, “No, son, I am not the coach. But I am a scout.” “Oh, sir,” asked the excited caddy, “Do you think I could play for the Dallas Cowboys?” “No, son, I think you are too small.” And he continued his game of golf.

As he was putting in the 18th hole, he was feeling a bit badly about his deception. And he took off that shirt and gave it to the boy. “Here, son,” he said, “I want you to have this. But I must warn you, I am afraid it is too big for you.” The young man put on the shirt and beamed up at him saying, “Oh, sir, don’t you worry about that. I’ll wear it ‘til it fits. I’ll wear it ‘til it fits.”

You and I are marked for life - tattooed - through our baptism. Our identity and our destiny are grounded and assured in the Triune dynamic eternal relationship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

We are MARKED for life, MARKED – TATTOOED - set apart indelibly. We are marked for LIFE, LIFE - promised here, now and always life through Jesus Christ the Son of God. We are live – Fully alive with the passion of Christ. So wear your new clothing until at last it fits.

Amen.

ⁱ Paul Minear, Mark, The Layman's Bible Commentary, p.23

ⁱⁱ Acts 15:39-41

ⁱⁱⁱ W. Frank Harrington, First Comes Faith, p.25

^{iv} Mark 1:10

^v Isaiah 64:1

^{vi} Review of Harry Potter on Web, "Theological Reflections on Harry Potter."