

Year B Baptism of the Lord 2024 Remember Your Baptism Mark 1 vv4 to 11

The instant that Jesus emerged from the water of the Jordan, having been plunged under the water and then lifted back up by the strong arms of John the Baptist, the instant his eyes clear of the water streaming down his face, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

This may feel like we're rushing things a bit. Just last week, Jesus was a newborn being held in the temple by Simeon. Today, Jesus is a grown man. But his birth and his baptism are the two pivotal events of the Christmas season. Christmas begins with his birth and ends with his baptism. In Mark's Gospel, his baptism is closely linked to a greater ending – his death on the cross. This is a very right and a very real link but to make sense of this connection between baptism and death, we need a solid understanding of baptism.

Water, as a way of cleansing and purifying, is a widespread image. John's baptism in water was for the forgiveness of sins – the cleansing of our bodies from sin, the purifying of our lives from sin. For a while, in the early church, people waited until they were on their deathbed before they finally got baptized. They didn't want to make the mistake of being baptized too soon, being cleansed from sin only to mess things up by sinning again, and then miss out on eternal life with God. So, they waited. When they were 100% sure they were about to die, they were baptized.

Maybe hearing this is a bit worrisome for you since we were all baptized quite a few years ago. We've all had plenty of time to "fall into sin." But let me reassure you – these deathbed baptisms are a misunderstanding of what it means to be cleansed from sin. In baptism, God has bestowed on us the forgiveness of sins. That is a gift we need only be given once. As part of our worship in the Holy Eucharist, we

acknowledge that we do need this forgiveness on an ongoing basis but we have been forgiven. We can be confident in God's forgiveness. The important bit to notice is that we repent – we are sorry for falling short and we ask for help from God to turn our lives to God, to walk in God's ways. We are not expected to be perfect but we are expected to be continuously striving toward this perfection.

This constant striving toward perfection, to be always trying to walk in God's ways, is a big part of what being baptized involves. Baptism is our acknowledgement that God's ways are the only path to true peace, joy, and love for all of creation and we are promising that we will live in those ways. As Max Lucado says, "Baptism is what separates the car buyers from the tire kickers." We've bought the car. We've committed to a life according to God's ways.

Walking up to the baptismal font means walking into a way of life. Baptism is an ongoing ministry of revealing God's kingdom and building the body of Christ. Four pillars of Christian life allow us to accomplish this ministry: worship, prayer, scripture study, and love of neighbour – Four pillars that lead us into life in God's kingdom.

Baptism is our door, our entryway into God's kingdom. Jesus, not long after his baptism, began proclaiming the good news that God's kingdom is here (1:15). We know, from looking around us – in the world and in our personal lives – the kingdom of God certainly is not yet fully here. Although we pray, each time we worship, for it to fully arrive... "Thy kingdom come... on earth as in heaven" ...at this point in time, the fullness of God's kingdom – the perfect joy, love, peace, and life everlasting – only is a reality in heaven. And heaven, paradise, life fully with God in God's presence – however you'd like to word it – is only accessible at this point, through dying. For now, full entry into God's kingdom with life everlasting happens

when we die. Jesus' baptism – total entry into the fullness of God's kingdom – was completed when he died on the cross. This is why Mark draws the line between Jesus' baptism and Jesus' death, connecting them together throughout his Gospel. The words of God we hear today at the instant of his baptism: "You are my Son, the Beloved" are echoed by the Roman centurion at the instant of his death: "Truly this man was God's Son" (15:39).

Jesus' death isn't the end of his story, though, and it isn't the end of ours. God raises Jesus to new life, through the power of the Holy Spirit, never to die again. It is through baptism that we receive that same gift of life. "I baptize in water," John says. "Jesus will baptize in the Holy Spirit." Jesus received the presence of the Holy Spirit at his baptism and shares that same Holy Spirit with us. "Do you not know," Paul writes, "that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Rom.6:3-5).

Each day lived is a day lived with the presence of the Holy Spirit, "clothed with Christ," (Gal.3:27) Paul explains. But putting on Christ comes with a cost. As I mentioned earlier, baptism is our buying the car moment. We agree that in putting on Christ, we will live as Christ lived: in close relationship with God through prayer and studying scripture, in worship and fellowship with other believers, proclaiming the kingdom, speaking out against corruption and injustice. We may feel like we are dim reflections of the life Christ lived but we are reflections. Baptismal life is a life lived daily – not just when an opportunity arises. Five hundred years ago, Martin Luther said, "When you wash your face, remember your baptism." In the shower

each day, as the water splashes over you, remember your baptism. It is a daily thing and, yes, it is work and yes, it can be tiring and yes, it can feel fruitless sometimes. Thankfully, we do not go it alone. We are in it together and we are in it with the power of the Holy Spirit working in us. In Christ, and in our daily return to our own baptisms, there is an inexhaustible source for the renewal and new beginnings of our lives (Titus 3:5).

“Beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”, Mark writes just a few short verses before our Gospel story today. Beginning of the good news, with no limiting “the” in front – Mark is proclaiming from the opening word that there are no limits to a “beginning” in whatever parable, story, miracle, deed, saying, teaching of Jesus in the gospel. A “beginning” takes place each time we hear the good news. And what good news: rejected by family and friends in his hometown, accused of being in league with Satan, tortured and mocked by Roman soldiers, spikes driven into his flesh. “There at the end, with the sky murderously dark, the air filled with Jesus’ death cry, and the temple curtain torn in two, Mark wants us to remember that earlier day when the skies, like the temple curtain, were also torn in two and a voice spoke from heaven. Mark wants us to hear the centurion at the foot of the cross confessing what we have known from the beginning, ‘Truly this man was the Son of God!’”

This is the identity revealed to Jesus at his baptism. He is God’s child, the Beloved, in whom God is well pleased. The knowledge of this identity, living into this identity carries him through all of the darkness, and despair, and dirt of the world thrown at him. We know who he is. Jesus of Nazareth knew who he was. “The one who appeared to be rejected is in reality the one in whom God is well-pleased. The one who appeared to be deserted by all is in reality the beloved Son. The one who

appeared powerless in death is the one in whose power all shall live” (adapted slightly from Tom Long’s *Shepherds and Bathrobes*, 61). It is this identity revealed to him at his baptism that carries him through, daily renews him, and this is the identity that we all share with him through baptism.

“In Flannery O’Conner’s story ‘The River,’ a woman named Mrs. Connin, who has been employed for the day to take care of the son of some wealthy and uncaring parents, takes the boy to a riverside baptismal service being led by a preacher named Bevel Summers. Standing on the river bank, they hear Summers warning the crowd that if they have come for an easy miracle, to leave their pain in the river, they have come for the wrong reason. ‘There ain’t but one river, and that’s the River of Life, made out of Jesus’ blood,’ he says. ‘It’s a river of pain itself’...Suddenly Mrs. Connin lifts the boy up in the air and asks the preacher to pray for the boy’s mother, who has been ill. Mrs. Connin tells Summers that she suspects that the boy has never been baptized, and Summers commands her to hand the boy to him. Summers asks the boy if he wants to be baptized. When the boy says yes, Summers responds, ‘You won’t be the same again. You’ll count.’” (p.61 -2 of *Shepherds and Bathrobes*).

You’ll count. Let the awareness of your identity carry through the brokenness. Let the presence of Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, renew you daily, let it bring you through the hard work of living in God’s arriving kingdom according to God’s ways, through the darkness and despair and dirt thrown at you. You are a child of God, you are beloved. Remember your baptism.