

7 January 2024

Anatomy of a Sacrament

Mark 1:4-11 / Acts 19:1-7

Today, as we consider the baptism of Jesus, we read two scriptures. First, the outline of what happened, from Mark 1, verses 4-11.

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

And now, a later look at baptism, from Acts 19, verses 1-7.

¹9 While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the inland regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. ²He said to them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?' They replied, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.' ³Then he said, 'Into what then were you baptized?' They answered, 'Into John's baptism.' ⁴Paul said, 'John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.' ⁵On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied—⁷altogether there were about twelve of them.

I want you to try to imagine something with me. Imagine that you are a visitor from a distant land, or even a distant planet, who speaks English but who has never heard of Jesus or John the Baptizer or even the word “baptism.” What do you make of that first scripture, the one about the fellow who comes out of the desert “preaching a baptism of repentance” and about this other guy, Jesus, who comes to him, was baptized, and whose baptism was marked by signs from the heavens? Well, first off, you’re going to ask, “What’s ‘baptism’?” to which I’ll reply, “Oh, it’s just the Greek word for putting something under water. It’s used sometimes to describe washing dishes.” As for the rest of the story, you’re going to consider this odd behavior, right? Why was this guy drenching people, and what does that have to do with repentance? And who was this Jesus, whom the heavens declared was the Son of God?

So let help you out, you poor confused souls. I’ll start with some background. The people of this land were called Jews, and they followed an extraordinary religion for its time, one that worshiped only one God, a transcendent and holy God who was also near to them and loved them. One of the things that the Jews did to honor God’s holiness was they washed themselves before they went into their holy shrine, in Jerusalem, and before their holy days. It was an external way to show that they were preparing their whole selves for the encounter with God.

That's kind of what this John was doing, calling people to prepare themselves for the encounter with God. But John was doing something different: he wasn't doing it at the shrine and he wasn't doing it before holy days. He seemed to be saying that today is a holy day, and the encounter with God was not coming on the scheduled day but any minute now. And this Jesus, the one that was called the Son of God, was apparently the one that would bring that encounter that John was looking for.

"Oh," you say in your innocence. "That explains it. So this drenching thing was done as a sort of public statement that God was about to do something amazing, something we needed to prepare ourselves for by repenting. Now I understand the term, 'baptism.'"

Well, um, not quite. I mean, that's probably good enough as far as John the Baptizer goes, but the word "baptism" gets just a little more complicated over time. You see, this Jesus starts preaching too. He apparently doesn't baptize people himself, but his disciples (some of whom started out with John) do. Jesus' teaching was a lot more comprehensive than John's, but baptism was still in the picture. Then Jesus died and rose from the dead – I know, that's a lot to absorb, but we don't have time to go into that today; I'll come back to it sometime – and before he returned to the heavens, he told his disciples to go out and make new disciples and to *baptize* them "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

"That's not so complicated," you say, poor, sweet summer children that you are. "That's just adding another layer of meaning to baptism. It was first a sign of repentance and preparation for the Kingdom of God, and now it's *also* a sign that you believe that God's kingdom has already come, with Jesus.

Yes, that's true as far as it goes. But it gets *more* complex over time. Bear with me a little longer. As Jesus' disciples began following his instructions and making new disciples along every Roman road, they met some people who had been baptized under the first definition, John's baptism, but not under the expanded definition that Jesus brought. This is the second reading we heard, from Acts 19. And it was determined that people who weren't adequately baptized under the correct understanding had to have another, remedial, baptism. Oh, and also there arose controversy in some churches about who *performed* baptisms. A church in Corinth divided into factions based on which disciple had done their drenching.

"Hmm," you say. "It sounds as if the disciples are starting to lose the plot. This thing that started out as a statement of faith in God's salvation is becoming a source of controversy and dissension. I hope the church stamped that out quickly, before it got worse."

Um, can I come back to that? Because a few more things happen first. You remember that Jesus told his followers to "make disciples" and that baptizing them was a second step. Well, somehow along the way, some people began to put those in the opposite order, making baptism the central part and being a disciple sort of an additional feature for the advanced, as if salvation only required baptism, and anyone who didn't get drenched was out of luck. Now this is obvious nonsense. You can't say in one breath that God is a God of love and forgiveness who longs for relationship with all of us, and then in the next breath say that that same God will reject anyone who hasn't ticked the box and gotten wet. Nevertheless, a great many people said this and believed it, which contributed to yet another church division, a rather large one called the Reformation. During that time a group of people called Anabaptists, or Mennonites, began defining baptism differently, as a public statement of repentance, kind of like John the Drencher said, which made the main group, called Roman Catholics, quite angry. And I should add that

there were some other groups, called Lutherans and Calvinists, who were also quite angry about that (among many other things), and they had their own views of baptism. So, that's been going on for about 500 years.

"I see," you say politely. "So that's . . . that's what baptism is. Thank you so much for clarifying it."

You're welcome. Happy to be of assistance.

And here we are today, on the day in the church year devoted to considering baptism, surrounded not just by what the Bible said, but also by the shades of what 2000 years of arguing Christians have said. In this congregation are disciples who were raised Roman Catholic seated with (even married to) disciples who were raised Mennonite. We have former Baptists, Lutherans, and other groups, all of whom still argue about these things. Who should be baptized? When? With how much water? Who should do it? And most of all, why should it be done at all?

As you've heard, that question has been answered a lot of contradictory ways over the centuries. Let me conclude by telling you what I think. This is not, so far as I know, official doctrine anywhere, and it might fail more than one group's heresy test, but this is where I have found rest and peace with the sacrament of baptism. The key to me is not how special baptism is, but how ordinary. In fact, both of our sacraments are at heart the most ordinary of activities: in the case of baptism, washing, and in the case of Communion, eating. What we say through our sacraments is, "Here in this place and time that we have sanctified, we are going to do one of the most ordinary things that humans do, but do it intentionally, with our ears opened for the voice of God." Over the past week we have all washed and eaten food, oh, several times, I hope. But the chances are that we have done so automatically. We have showered by pure muscle memory, our minds elsewhere, so that we sometimes wonder "Did I wash my hair yet or not?" We have eaten in a rush, bolting down whatever meals or snacks we could fit into open slots in our calendar, or while doing other things. But when we approach a sacrament we say, "Today we're going to shake ourselves awake and do these ordinary, unglamorous things with the awed awareness that God is in them." When we baptize, I don't think we are saying that the baptismal waters are somehow holier than all other waters and that they perform a special miracle. I think that we are dimly remembering that all waters are miraculous, and publicly acknowledging that God's cleansing forgiveness is always this near. When we take the elements of Communion, I don't think we are saying that this bread and cup are transformed into something else or that they perform a miracle on those who take them. I think we are, in our fumbling way, remembering that Christ is in everything we eat and drink. It is still a mystery, but not a special mystery that can only happen under special circumstances. The mystery is that during this time, we remember to notice.

We humans are strange creatures, created for a world that shouts the glory of God from every corner, but currently living in a different one where God must be sought in the shadows. We don't belong in these shadowlands, but too often we make ourselves at home anyway and forget who we are. The sacraments are a time when we pull back the veil and do something ordinary in an extraordinary way, as if we were already home in that brighter land. There will be no sacraments in heaven, because we will no longer need them, but until then, we turn to them to shake our dull wits and muddled memories of who we are.

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When John the Baptizer broke with tradition and began offering ritual cleansing in an ordinary river, on weekdays, he was making a dramatic statement. The Kingdom of God is not just in the temple or on the high holy days. It's here and now. In a sense, we've returned our rituals to the shrine and the scheduled worship times, but let us not leave them there. This week may your ordinary washings and nibblings be holy. Amen.