

Drowning in Blessings

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

Baptism of Jesus/B, January 8, 2006

Lynne M. Dolan

No shepherds. No angels. No stable. No star. No Magi. No warnings. No alternate route home. No, instead Mark begins at the river. “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.” He makes no mention of Jesus’ ancestry. Nor does he speak of the cosmic wonders that fill the opening of John’s gospel, “in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” Mark moves directly to baptism.

Until now, John has invited people to participate in a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. However, he proclaims that someone will come who will not only baptize with water, but the Holy Spirit as well. That moment has come. Jesus is the one. He goes to the river asking to be baptized with the others. John does not protest or argue. He simply complies with Jesus’ request. However, something very different happens to Jesus. As he emerges from the water, the heavens are torn apart and the Spirit descends upon him like a dove. Is that how it happened at your baptism? Were the heavens torn apart? Did you see Spirit descend on you or your child? Have you ever heard God declare your “belovedness?”

Jesus begins his ministry with baptism as a gesture of hospitality and solidarity. He has come as one of us, to live with us, to be like us. Therefore, he begins his ministry with us. His baptism, unlike John’s, would do more than wash away sins. Jesus promises the presence of the Holy Spirit and a special relationship with God, a relationship available to all regardless of sin or merit, age or status, “Jew” or “Gentile.” This is the beginning of something new, unknown, earth shattering. God’s love embraces all of us. Jesus knew and experienced this for all of us. That is why he made his way to the river. That is why he begins his ministry with baptism.

We love the Christmas story. It is so poignantly powerful: a mother giving birth, the adoration of shepherds, the meager surroundings, the choir of angels, the unexpected ones blessed and celebrated. Then we quickly turn the page and move on. I invite us this morning to move with Mark to the river to experience Jesus’ baptism with that same sense of awe and wonder. What makes this day so amazing is the juxtaposition of the mundane and the mysterious. We have all participated in baptisms, but few can attest to the heavens tearing open and the voice of God speaking to us. Why not? Why does this only happen for Jesus? Perhaps I speak too soon. Perhaps it has happened for you. After all, isn’t the Holy Spirit present whenever we celebrate baptism, transforming that simple act into something simply mysterious?

I love this Sunday because I love baptism and I am in awe of what happens whenever we come to the font. I believe the Holy Spirit is always present here and wherever we share in the sacrament of baptism. I believe God affirms our belovedness each and every time. Every year, in the midst of making our New Year resolutions, Jesus invites us to

remember that the same God that declared his blessedness loves, celebrates and continues to treasure us. What do you feel as you hear this story? Is it simply an historical account of the beginning of Jesus' ministry or is it an invitation for you to experience the divine, to be enter into its mystery?

Sacraments and rituals are powerful because they take us to places we do not normally go. When we are open to their transcendent power, these events can change our lives. This week the ninth grade Wednesday School class talked about baptism. I asked them who had been baptized and they all raised their hands. Then I asked what they remembered about their baptism and most could only recall what their parents had told them, or what they saw in the pictures taken on that day. Someone asked, "can you be baptized again?" I explained that once you are welcomed and accepted as God's beloved that never goes away, you don't ever need to be baptized again, however there are many opportunities for us to remember our baptism. I could tell they were disappointed, as if they had been cheated out of something special.

We long to have those kinds of life changing experiences. We long for those moments where we enter into the mystery, where time stands still, and we know that something awesome has happened. Simple gestures can have that kind of profound power. Many of the students talked about the 10:00 Christmas Eve service. For some, this year was the first time they had experienced that service. With a genuine sense of blessing and grace, they spoke of lighting the candles, then darkening the sanctuary, singing "Silent Night" and raising their candles high. That simple gesture makes such an impact and we know people would protest if we ever tried to change this. In that moment, the Holy Spirit breaks in and there are times when we can hardly make it through the first verse of Silent Night without weeping.

Rituals help us to both remember and re-member, to reconnect, to be renewed, to recommit ourselves to our journey of faith. At Christmas we celebrate the miracle of Emanuel, God-with-us. Just a few weeks later I hope the wonder and awe we experienced have not completely vanished. Can we fully appreciate the power in the tearing of heaven and the descending dove? Does it make any sense to us or does it feel no more exhilarating than the battle scene in the recent Narnia movie?

The preacher and teacher William Willimon tells a great joke based on this text. There was a youth group being led in bible study by the pastor who, trying to interject some life into the gathering, said, "Do you see this, heavens torn open, you know what that means? It means now we have direct access to God in Jesus, no intermediaries. We can go right to God." A kid who appeared to be sleeping stirs and says, "No, that's not what it means." Pastor says, "What you know Greek? You're so smart?" "Yeah," says the kid, "schizomei, means torn open. It means now, God can get at us. Now, no one is safe." That seems in many ways closer to the mark.

Baptism is risky business. Now, God can get at us, and no one is safe. Whenever we bring a child to be baptized we ensure the ministry that began that day in the Jordan River will continue. We declare that God is still speaking, we are still listening and the Holy

Spirit is still working in the world. In that moment, we rejoice in our belovedness. It is important that we create rituals to help us re-member. Not simply to recollect what happened, but to bring us back to that moment of joy, wonder and awe.

The word “baptize” comes from the Greek word “baptein,” meaning “to dip, steep, dye, or color.” Just as an ounce of dye colors a gallon of water, so the recognition of God’s love colors, “dyes” if you will, our whole life, imperfect though we may be. One writer comments that “like being given a check for a huge sum of money, if we don’t cash it, it’s still good, but useless—and we cut ourselves off from what in fact we’ve been given.”

As we look at the world through the eyes of baptism, we see everyone as a beloved child. God says to each of us, “you are my beloved, with whom I am well pleased!” Sin is real, but God’s grace and acceptance are more real. They color our whole life. It is not because we have value that we are loved, but because we are loved that we have value. That goes against everything the world tries to teach us, but it is the gospel truth. It is not because we have value that we are loved, but because we are loved that we have value.

What would it be like for you to live your belovedness? We can find all kinds of reasons to negate our belovedness. We are so easily seduced into believing that we have to earn God’s love, that we will only receive it if we are good enough, smart enough, strong enough, or clever enough. We forget ever hearing this promise of belovedness. We forget who we are and whose we are. Sadder still, says one preacher, we come to believe that this could not possibly be God’s word for me, here, now, today. However, to believe that God is not speaking to us, that we are not God’s beloved, he says, is to separate ourselves, our very selves, from the love of God. And to separate our self from the love of God is what we call sin. This is perhaps the most fundamental sin: to forget we are God’s Beloved; to deny that in fact God is well pleased with us.

It may take a daily discipline to have that awareness of our belovedness color our being. Perhaps you already have a ritual that helps you get in touch with your belovedness. If you do, “Bravo!” stick with it! If you don’t, I invite you to try this. For the next thirty days, read Psalm 139 once a day. Read it each day as if you had never read it before. It is old news, it is new news, it is Good News.

In addition to the ancient wisdom of the psalmist, hear this short passage from Henri Nouwen’s little book, *Life of the Beloved*. Listen to his words with an attentive ear. At your center is a voice that says:

I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my beloved, on you my favor rests. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother’s womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. I will give you food that will satisfy all your hunger and drink that will satisfy all your thirst. I will not hide my face from you.

You know me as your own as I know you as my own. You belong to me. I am your father, your mother, your brother, your sister, your lover, your spouse. Yes, even your child. Wherever you are I will be. Nothing will ever separate us. We are one."

We are God's beloved, washed away, drowning in God's blessings. God's spirit hovers above us night and day, calling us, forming us, making us God's own. You are my beloved, now and forever. May it be so! Amen