

## **“Blessed & Beloved” – Mark 1:4-11**

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Creator God, we thank you for calling us into being, naming and claiming us as your own, and meeting us in our daily living along this journey of faith. May we listen with open hearts for your word to each of us this day. Amen.

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As we now have wound down another holiday season and are finding our footing in a new year, it's a great time to take a look once again at some of the essential and foundational elements of our faith tradition. This season after Epiphany invites us to do just that as we explore some of the gospel stories of Jesus' public ministry. Today we begin with the story of his baptism. And in coming weeks we'll hear about the calling of the first disciples as well as stories of healing and community building.

In contrast to both Matthew and Luke, the Gospel of Mark contains no Christmas stories and no stories of Jesus as a child. Instead, Jesus makes his first appearance in Mark here in this moment when he comes from Nazareth down to the Jordan River to be baptized by John.

Wild man John the Baptist – I just love him, don't you? With his camel hair clothing and living-off-the-land locust and honey diet (maybe the honey helps locusts go down easier, I don't know). It's funny sometimes the way the biblical text often leaves a lot up to our imagination and then throws in interesting details like this description of John.

I think John must have been a memorable figure to those who lived during his time. People would have seen him as a prophet. And, his ascetic, bare-bones, wilderness lifestyle would have reminded them of the prophet Elijah, in particular, who was such an important person in their historical tradition.

Not unlike Elijah, John held the political and religious leaders of his time to high moral standards and didn't seem to hesitate to call out their shortcomings. His preaching out against the hypocrisy and immorality of Herod Antipas may have been what led to his execution, at least in part. The first century Jewish historian, Josephus, notes that Herod also feared that John and his followers might lead a rebellion.

Before Jesus shows up, John has already gained quite a following. He calls people to the Jordan River proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins – “Come, let go of your past wrongs and be made new in these holy waters. Prepare yourselves for the coming of the Lord.” And people respond. From Jerusalem and all over Judea, people come to him to be baptized.

And to those who gather with him and respond to this invitation, John also proclaims that one more powerful than he is coming soon. Now you will be baptized with water. Soon you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

And then Jesus shows up, of course. And so does the Holy Spirit. Jesus' baptismal moment makes it clear that the promised one of God is here.

It's a little ambiguous in Mark's telling of this story whether anyone but Jesus actually sees the Spirit descend like a dove or hears that voice from heaven proclaim, "You are my son, the Beloved." But we, the readers, sure do. And we are to recognize the importance of this moment as Jesus' identity is emphasized and it is made clear that he is filled with the Holy Spirit.

In the gospels, John is the one who prepares the way for Jesus. It's likely that many of his own followers became followers of Jesus. John invited people to step into the river as a symbolic commitment to their faith, a commitment to follow. It was a stepping out of old ways of living and into a new one. In that way, baptism is a sort of threshold experience.

The Jordan River itself is a threshold: the traditional boundary of the Promised Land, the place between civilization and wilderness. And into the wilderness is where Jesus will go next, after his baptism to fast, pray, and face temptation before returning to begin his public ministry.

Even today the Jordan is still an interesting juxtaposition of civilization and wilderness. The baptismal site is built up to accommodate tourists and pilgrims with a large parking lot for buses, and cement steps with numbered gates that lead people into the river to be baptized, and a gift shop where you can buy a bottle of river water if you don't have your own empty bottle to collect some.

But look down stream, or drive a little further, and you'll see lush overgrown foliage. The shallow water is often murky and silty. When I visited, there were a couple of coypus (water-loving rats) that were swimming around. The Jordan is still a bit wild in some ways.

That's appropriate, I think, because baptism is a threshold that leads us deeper into our journey of faith and can help prepare us to face our own wilderness when we must.

For John, baptism was not a purification ritual to be repeated. Such rituals existed at that time, but this was different. People didn't need to get re-baptized if (and when) they messed up somehow. Nor was baptism understood to be an end in itself. It wasn't the end of the journey of faith. It was a step along the journey.

But, even so, baptism was an important step. It was an act of repentance that symbolized a fresh start – a holy bath, a cleansing from past wrongs. It was a symbolic act of transformation; a letting go of past hang-ups and beginning anew with renewed commitment.

Baptism was and still is a symbolic act of our preparation to follow Jesus, of acceptance of God's call to faithful living, of receptiveness to and reliance on the Holy Spirit.

Baptism was and still is an external symbol of an inner choice to claim this path of faith for oneself. In that way, it's an act of preparation for the next phase of our journey.

People often ask why Jesus needed to be baptized. And I think this is why. I think he saw his own baptism as an act of preparation for the next phase of his journey; the path that would lead him first into the wilderness (where his baptismal commitment would be immediately put to the test) and then into his ministries of healing, teaching, community building, and all that would follow. I think stepping into that river with John symbolized his commitment to follow where God would lead him.

It's still the same for us too. When a baby or young child is baptized, their parents take on the responsibility and commitment to help their child grow in faith so they can one day make their own decision to claim this path (that's what the confirmation process is for in our tradition). And when an older youth or adult is baptized, they make that commitment and claim that responsibility for themselves. In both cases, the congregation, the church community, also promises our ongoing support to the one being baptized. This journey is not one we take alone.

When Jesus came up out of the water at his baptism, filled with the Holy Spirit, he received the most amazing blessing: "You are my child; you are my beloved."

That is a blessing that is given to us too. We are all God's children. We are all God's beloved. Whether you have been baptized or not, this is a blessing that already belongs to you, that already belongs to all of us.

That is one of the things that Jesus taught us. Over and over, he blessed people as he taught them, healed them, cared for them, and connected with them. In doing so, he reminded them that they are God's beloved.

Perhaps especially those who felt cast aside, isolated, or excluded by poverty, illness, loss, and other circumstances needed to hear this, needed this reminder. Jesus blessed those who may have wondered where God was or if God had forgotten them – and reminded them that God was with them and that God's love would never cease.

This is something we affirm in every baptism too. Baptism is a symbolic reminder of this blessing that is ours from the beginning. One of the classic definitions of a sacrament is "an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace." In the sacrament of baptism an ordinary thing, water, becomes infused with sacred meaning as it affirms that grace upon us, that already true blessing from God: "You are my beloved. You are my child." Whether it's sprinkled, poured, or we step on in to be immersed, that water is a symbol of God's abundant grace and God's Holy Spirit poured out upon us.

So, if you need a reminder of this – the next time you take a shower or a bath, go for a swim or soak in the jacuzzi, or step out in the rain (if we're lucky enough to get some more rain for those of us here in Long Beach), remember this grace. Let the water and this blessing of unending, ever-present love soak into your spirit. Honor its truth.

When I was a kid my mom always called me a water rat (not unlike the coypus in the Jordan River, I guess). She called me that because I loved water. I loved baths, took too long showers, and practically lived at the neighborhood pool in the summertime.

So, when it came time for me to choose to be baptized at age fourteen, I had to go all in. One of our pastors was an ordained Disciples of Christ pastor (like Pastor Dave) and was trained in immersion. So that's what we did – at Abiquiu Lake in New Mexico while our church was on a Labor Day weekend retreat. I wore a tie-dye t-shirt over my swimsuit, and we all went swimming afterwards.

It's a memory I cherish. I still remember the moment I came back up out of that cold water. After the shock and chill wore off, it did feel like something special had happened. It was a threshold moment as I claimed this path of faith for myself. Little did I know then that one day I would become a pastor and get the joy and privilege of offering this baptismal blessing to others.

And all these years later it dawns on me how important it is for us all to honor and remember this blessing that we are God's beloved. It was a message I needed to hear at age fourteen. It's a message I still need to hear.

Whether or not you have been baptized yet, whether or not you remember your own baptism (if you were a baby) there comes a time when we must claim this blessing from God and this journey for ourselves, when we choose to honor and live into this blessing.

It's not about claiming that we know everything, have all our beliefs sorted out, and have no doubts or questions left. I don't think that's possible. It's about claiming the journey of faith – a journey that we travel our whole lives long.

And sometimes we may need to reclaim this blessing and this journey again along the way. We may need to remember that God has called us into relationship and faithful discipleship, not out of obligation, but out of love.

And not only had God called us into loving relationship with God's self, but also with our neighbors. We are blessed to be a blessing. I always say that when I baptize someone: You are blessed to be a blessing.

How will you, beloved of God, use your gifts and abilities to bless others, to bless the world? For that is how God has always blessed the world – through the actions of God's people.

And perhaps one simple way we might bless others is to remind them that they are loved. Because sometimes we forget. And sometimes things happen that cause us to doubt it.

Sometimes we get down on ourselves, stressed out, tired, and frustrated. Sometimes we start to dwell on other people's criticisms. Sometimes we start comparing ourselves to other people, wondering if we measure up and worrying that we don't. I especially worry about teenagers with that one, but adults do it too.

And sometimes life can even push us to a place where we struggle to see any blessing at all, and we feel like we are all alone. I think even Jesus felt that way, especially at the end of his life.

Sometimes we need the reminder that we are not alone and that we are so very loved. If you need that reminder right now, I hope you hear it today.

Perhaps you aren't feeling any of those things right now. But, do you know someone who might be? Who do you know who might need to hear a word of blessing from you?

We all need a reminder now and then.

That's why I think it is good for us to revisit this story of baptismal blessing. And perhaps that's why this voice from heaven, God's voice, speaks not only to Jesus, but through the words of scripture, directly to us as well.

You are God's beloved. You are blessed. Continue to be a blessing. Amen.