

1 Epiphany 2015
Mark 1:1-4
January 11th, 2015
The Rev. John Forman

One of my favorite scenes in the film “O Brother, Where Art Thou?” is the baptism at the river. The comedy is loosely based on Homer’s *Odyssey* and focuses on three degenerate escaped convicts on a quest for treasure in the American deep south of the 1930s. In the baptism scene, a long line of people in white robes walk toward a pastor standing waist deep in a river. Two of the escaped convicts, Everett and Pete, watch as Delmar, the third convict, suddenly goes running off into the river, splashing his way to the front of the line to be dipped.

As Delmar comes sauntering back to his friends, still dripping, he grins a big wet smirk and says to his friends, “Well that’s it, boys. I’ve been redeemed. The preacher’s done warshed away all my sins and transmissions. It’s the straight and narrow from here on out, and heaven everlasting’s my reward.” Everett is having none of it: “Delmar, what are you talking about? We’ve got bigger fish to fry.” But Delmar stands firm: “The preacher says all my sins is warshed away, including that Piggly Wiggly I knocked over in Yazoo.” “I thought you said you was innocent of those charges?” says Everett. “Well, I was lyin’,” says Delmar, “and the preacher says that that sin’s been warshed away too. Neither God ner man’s got nothin’ on me now. C’mon in boys, the water is fine.”

On this, the first Sunday after the Epiphany, we celebrate the baptism of Jesus. This is also a day to ponder the meaning of baptism—to consider what our own baptism means or wonder what baptism does. Our readings this morning invite a bucketful of questions and Delmar is not the only one who has felt baptism’s instantaneous and cleansing effect. Delmar is also not the only one who has misunderstood baptism. His friend, Everett, points out that “Even if it did put you square with the Lord, the state of Mississippi’s a little more hardnosed.” Baptism does not remove our responsibility for wrongs done. Baptism is not magic: it doesn’t make God love us anymore than God already does. Baptism is not fire insurance; it is not a “get-out-of-hell-free” card.

If baptism is none of those, our scripture readings don’t provide a great deal of clarity about what baptism is. Our first reading from Genesis mentions the wind or Spirit of God sweeping over the face of the waters in creation, providing a clue as to the

meaning of baptism. Christians and Jews share the symbolism of water with numerous religions and wisdom traditions whose rituals and writings use life-giving water to remind us of birth and renewal, or life-threatening water to evoke death. We, like many other religions, also use water in washing rituals to symbolize preparation for meeting the Divine. These are all certainly elements of the sacrament of Baptism and all are implied by the Genesis reference. But while Genesis reminds us of God's creative capacity to speak everything into existence, the reading doesn't tell us what baptism is—what it means.

The reading from Acts gives us a story about some disciples who have been baptized with water into John's baptism of repentance. They have never heard of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. When Paul lays hands upon them, they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and immediately begin speaking in tongues and prophesying. This reading doesn't clarify for us what baptism is—what it means.

Mark's Gospel drops right into the action of John the Baptizer's ministry already well underway, but makes no effort to clarify what baptism is. This rather pithy passage is an excellent example of writing for what cultural anthropologists call "high context" cultures. This style of writing is intended for a group that shares so many assumptions, experiences and expectations that a writer can leave out the detail they expect the audience to know. Tone of voice, gestures and the culture itself do the bulk of the explaining. Most of us here in the cities and suburbs of the Northwest live most of the time in "low-context" cultures, where we need to be much more explicit and leave far fewer details out. Legal contracts and loan agreements, for example, don't do well with nuance and unspoken assumptions.

What Mark's Gospel doesn't say is actually quite intriguing, so allow me to put into words what would have been taken for granted by Mark's early audiences. For Jesus to leave his family to find John would have been startling, perhaps even shameful. In the ancient Mediterranean world, the family was the primary social institution. Individuals had no identity or any meaningful existence outside their families. By leaving his family, first century Middle Eastern audiences would assume that he was as good as dead.

Mark provides an immediate solution. A voice from heaven claiming Jesus to be the Son of God, beloved of God and pleasing to God claims Jesus as family. In the ancient world, a boy or girl became a son or daughter only when a father acknowledged the baby as his own. Joseph did this by marrying Mary and embedding Jesus into a human family that gave him an honorable and secure setting for growing up. And when Jesus left that setting, he put his earthly identity at risk. Entering the water, his baptism freed him from life-threatening social threats; human threats. Emerging from the water, Jesus was acknowledged and claimed by the head of his heavenly family.

By becoming one of us, by throwing his lot with humanity, Jesus the Christ changed all humanity. We are his brothers and sisters. What he had by nature, we have by grace. When John baptized Jesus, the water baptism became a baptism of the Spirit. At that moment, Christian baptism first began to transcend and include John's baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Christian baptism would not mature until the coming of the early church in the time after the death, resurrection and ascension. Now, as the Risen Christ is the true minister of all Christian baptisms, they all share in Jesus's own baptism as we are buried with him in the water and rise to new life in him, sharing in the Holy Spirit who rested in fullness on Jesus, our brother.

The first lines of Mark's Gospel are, for some reason, left out of this morning's lectionary. What comes a few lines before our reading is this: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." The phrase echoes our reading from Genesis: "In the beginning...." And that is what baptism *is*. Baptism is a dramatic, heavens-tearing moment of beginning—one, decisive holy moment in which a person is oriented in one direction rather than another.

Baptism is also a death. Because what baptism *begins* is the exquisite, slow and sometimes painful process of sanctification. Baptism is a death to our bondage to sin, to our own death-dealing patterns and to our isolation from others. Every baptism is a communal event, not simply an individual or a family celebration. The Holy Spirit works through communities of the adequate, not communities of the perfect—real humans with all their shortcomings and all their brilliance. The Holy Spirit works through communities of real people to burn away anything that seeks to separate us from God.

Sanctification is the transformation of our perspectives, our behaviors, our socioeconomic systems and ethics. Baptism incorporates us into the church. There in the church, the Holy Spirit transforms and sanctifies us through prayer and worship, learning, service to others, and living in community with each other. The process is sometimes gradual and sometimes punctuated, and as we progress it is through the love of God who forges in our baptism what the Book of Common Prayer call “an indissoluble link” with us.

We walk in Jesus’ wet footprints—each one of us called, claimed and sent. When given the gift of the Holy Spirit at baptism, each new Christian and the community that they join are drawn further into God’s outpouring of the Spirit for all of creation. We become prophets. Now, we often to think of prophesying as foretelling the future, but in the ancient Jewish world, to prophesy was to talk about the present; in particular, to speak out against injustices, to live lives that radiate God’s love to the world around us or to show people that we all have the possibility of sharing in God’s forgiveness and reconciliation. That is the rest of the meaning of baptism.

In a moment we will reaffirm our baptismal vows. I will bless the water and then I will carry that water through the congregation and rain it down upon you. With each drop that falls, remember your baptism. Remember your baptism and be healed. Remember your baptism and be strengthened. Remember your baptism and recommit yourself to the Holy Spirit’s process of sanctification. Remember your baptism and turn again, not simply away from sin, but turning to Christ. Christ is an inexhaustible source for the renewal and new beginnings of all lives. Turn to Christ in each other here and outside these walls. Remember your baptism and that we, too, are beloved sons and daughters of God with whom God is well pleased.