

“Anointed and Sealed”
Mark 1:9-11, 2 Cor 1:21-22
Brentwood First Presbyterian
8/26/07
Mike Magee

Introduction

Written after Paul's letters, but before the other 3 Gospels, about 67-70 CE, in a Roman province outside Palestine, either Syria or Italy, Mark is reputed to be Peter's companion in Rome. Compared to Mt and Lk, Mk has less of Jesus' teachings, and does not have a birth story. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark introduces the reader to Jesus in the first chapter, grounds him in the OT, and prefaces him only with John the Baptizer.

I believe the Gospels hold Jesus' life up to us as an embodiment of who God wants us to be and what God wants us to do. Which is why I believe today's lesson can tell us some truths about Baptism. Lot of controversies surrounding Baptism. Controversies about immersion vs sprinkling. Believer's Baptism vs infant Baptism. Baptism of repentance vs a Baptism of affirmation. And so on and so on.

Scripture

Movement 1 Jesus is Baptized

I imagine a hot August day not unlike what we have had recently. I imagine children crying as entire households come down to the muddy Jordan River. I imagine long lines waiting. Waiting to lie back in John's hands, and for him to gently lower his hands into the water so they are totally submersed for what seems like a lifetime. I imagine fear at being submersed, because in those days there were no swimming lessons at the Y. I imagine an element of trust. Trust that those same strong hands are going to bring you back to the surface again. And I imagine the sun blinding your eyes as you shake the muddy water out of them.

Talked to a retired Baptist minister yesterday who reminded me that the word βαπτίζω also appears in Mark chapter 7. In that location βαπτίζω describes washing pots and pans by immersion. I looked it up. I think those pots and pans might have been cleaned by sprinkling or pouring hot water over them, like we do on Boy Scout campouts. Anyway, early church scholars tell us there is a document written around 70 AD which did not make it to our Bible, but was perhaps written by the Acts church, the earliest church. Written even before the Gospel of John. It is called the Didache, which is the Greek word for teaching. The Didache says for Baptism it is acceptable to either immerse in living water, that is a river, or to Baptize by pouring water on the head three times, once

each in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Don't think this settles the issue, but the Didache tells us that the early church did on occasion Baptize by pouring instead of immersion. Maybe the mechanics of Baptism are not as important as the inward meaning it symbolizes. But there is still controversy over the meaning of Baptism and who can get it.

Yes, Baptism is quite the hot topic. For example, those who are intolerant of infant Baptism have a word for those who do tolerate it. They call them "pedo-Baptists." As if that was a bad word. All the word means of course is child Baptizers, pediatric Baptizers. Sounds like something more sinister, though, doesn't it. Those pedo-Baptists, they say, deny the Baptism of repentance that John the Baptizer clearly proclaims. The Baptism of John that denies access to the unrepentant Pharisees because their hearts are not pure. Those intolerant of pedo-Baptism say it does not provide an age of accountability. That pedo-Baptists say you can love God and do as you please. No change in ways necessary. The pedo-Baptists themselves respond that Jesus' closest followers are tax-collectors, prostitutes, Gentiles, and even traitors. All broke bread at his table. Jesus would break bread with anyone, even us. He was not selective. The pedo-Baptists remind us that entire households are Baptized in Acts, spouses, servants, and children. The pedo-Baptists remind us that Emperor Constantine – you know, the fellow who legalized Christianity in the Roman empire after three centuries of persecution – Emperor Constantine refused to be Baptized until his death bed because he was afraid he might commit an impious act, or sin against his neighbor after Baptism. He did not want to risk falling out of God's grace between his Baptism and his death. Don't think either John the Baptizer or Jesus had this distortion in mind as they were standing in the Jordan River that day.

Movement 2 Jesus is affirmed

We translate the Greek word μετανοια as repentance. But it also means change of heart and change of direction. Mark says John calls for a Baptism of μετανοια, a Baptism of repentance. I suspect he has been doing this for years. But Jesus needs no repentance, needs no turn-back to God. So I wonder if John's pre-Christian Baptism of repentance itself changes meaning the moment John Baptizes Jesus. I wonder if at the moment of Jesus' Baptism, the meaning of Baptism itself changes forever.

My sons were excited to join the Boy Scouts. They heard about the campouts, and wanted someday to become Eagle Scouts. But the happiest day in their Boy Scout lives was not the day they became Eagle Scouts. It seems to me it was instead the day they joined the scout troop at age eleven. It was at their first Boy Scout court of honor. They were called up in front of the entire troop and had pinned on their pocket the fleur-de-lis, the simple scout badge you get when you join the troop. It is not something you earn. It is a badge you get signifying the Scoutmaster's seal of approval in front of the whole troop. This badge they never earned, it seems to me, was the happiest day of all their

scouting days, even happier than the Eagle rank for which they worked so hard and earned years later. How much happier are we when we receive the approval of our heavenly Father at the time of our Baptism, in front of the whole church. Don't misunderstand. Unlike receiving the scout badge, Baptism is not a rite of inclusion in a club. Instead it is an outward and visible sign, a public acknowledgment of something we already know in our hearts, our inclusion into God's unconditional and unmerited love. We are worthy not because of anything we have done. We can add nothing to what Jesus has done for us.

At the time of Jesus' Baptism, the heavens open up and God's Spirit comes down like a dove, hovering over Jesus. And a loud voice comes from heaven saying, "This is my child, in whom I am well pleased." But in Mark, only Jesus and the reader of Mark are witness to heaven's testimony.

It seems both the Gospels of Mark and Luke ascribe to the Baptism of Jesus the role of God's affirmation, combined with his receiving the Holy Spirit. And for the Gospel writers, Jesus' Baptism anticipates our Baptism as God's children. It is Matthew and Matthew alone who seems to connect Baptism with the church. Not so with Mark or Luke, where the Baptism of Jesus seems to be purely that of his affirmation as God's child.

It is said Baptism is an anointing. But anointing is an ambiguous word. Does it just mean being included? Or does it also mean being elevated above others? To be elevated implies having arrived, Baptism being the pinnacle in your life as a Christian, with the expectation of going only down hill after that. Not too long ago I was an assistant scoutmaster. One of the Boy Scouts was elected to be the senior patrol leader. But he does not fulfill his responsibilities for the highest office in the troop. So I have to counsel him. I have to tell him that being anointed the senior patrol leader is not an honor as much as it is a responsibility. Yes, Baptism is an anointing. How much more is Baptism the first step in fulfilling God's plan for us to do justice, to love kindness, and walk humbly with our God?

Instead of dedication to a goal or destination, another kind dedication is to a way of life. Dedication to a way of life implies importance of the journey, not a destination or goal. A journey of listening like Mary. A journey of including others like Jesus includes tax collectors, prostitutes, Gentiles, and even traitors. A journey of being a neighbor to people in need like the Good Samaritan was. A journey of forgiveness and reconciliation like the father of the Prodigal and the older son. Yes, a journey of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with your God.

One theologian writes, "Baptism is a one-time event that takes a lifetime to finish."

Perhaps John's Baptism of repentance is overturned that day he Baptizes Jesus. He himself remarks that something amazing is about to happen. Perhaps the

Good News is not first found at the crucifixion. Perhaps it is first found at the time of Jesus' Baptism. A Baptism of inclusion. A seal of approval. And an anointing and a commissioning to walk with Jesus and continue his work.

Movement 3 Jesus came

Is God coercive or persuasive? Is that first step toward believing, trusting, and discipling, is that first step toward Baptism pre-determined by God as if we were puppets and God is the divine puppet master? As if God were moving our feet for us? Doesn't relegating us to the role of puppets deny our God-given free will? Tough questions.

What does today's Gospel lesson say? "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth." Jesus came. He was not pushed. He was not pulled. He was not carried. He came. He came 75 miles from Nazareth to the spot on the Jordan River where John was Baptizing.

God loves us first and unconditionally. And we respond in like kind of our own free will. We are not God's puppets. We come. Maybe not 75 miles like Jesus. But we come. What is the age of accountability? The Bible is silent here. But in prayer, you and I hear God's voice, like Jesus heard God 2000 years ago, like Sasha hears God in prayer today, and she, like Jesus, comes. She is not pushed, pulled, or carried. She comes the first step of many steps. And she is anointed. God puts a seal of approval on her in the form of Baptism. She is included, and anointed to 24/7 service. Sounds like hard work. For she will never again have a life outside of church and God. She may get tired. But she will be sustained and refreshed because God's Spirit is received in her heart today as a first installment. The first of many installments.

For the Baptism of Jesus is dying to our self-centered endeavors and being resurrected into a life marked by grace and love. When we live in the Baptism of Jesus, we touch the hearts of others and help open them to the Holy Spirit and new life in Jesus. Jesus came not to be served but to serve.

Those who are Baptized in Jesus do not need to strive after a new life. They have already been resurrected into new life through dying with Jesus. But they do need to nurture that new life so it can grow and mature. That's what church is for. That's what Bible study is for. That's what prayer is for.

Conclusion

About 2000 years ago a small group of Jewish people, living under the tyranny of Roman rule, began to listen to the words of an itinerant preacher. They saw him reach out in love to hurting, broken people, to comfort them and to heal them. They heard him give radically new interpretations of the ancient Scripture. Then they watched in horror as he was arrested, tried on trumped-up charges, beaten,

mocked, and finally nailed to a cross to die between two thieves. They experienced the pain of seeing him dead and buried on Friday, and the joy of seeing him alive again on Sunday morning. They heard his promise that his spirit would remain with them all the days of their lives and beyond.

And as they remembered what he had said and done, maybe they remembered the day of his Baptism by John in the Jordan River. Maybe they remembered that a voice from heaven declared, "This is my Beloved, in whom I am well pleased." And maybe the pieces of the puzzle began to fit a little better for them.

May you live in the relationship God has created with you in your Baptism; may you know and respond to the love God has offered you; and in that love, may you find healing and hope.

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's people say ...