

January 17, 2021
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A Nation's Baptism
Mark 1:4-11



We continue to explore the development of the Jesus story. The Christmas narrative comes to us in Matthew and in Luke. Now we move to Mark where his Jesus story begins not with a baby. No shepherds or magi. Not Bethlehem or Nazareth. The oldest gospel we have has no birth story. Mark begins his Jesus story at the Jordan river. Listen with me to this reading from the beginning of Mark .

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."

There is so much packed into this brief passage, so much that can slip by unnoticed to our modern ears. Mark places us in the wilderness on the far side of the Jordan which is noteworthy. The Jordan River and its crossing played a crucial role in Israel's identity and within its history. It was at the crossing of the Jabbok, a tributary of the Jordan, that Israel first received its name (Genesis 32:22-32). It was the miraculous crossing of the Jordan under the leadership of Joshua that Israel entered into the Promised Land after their period of wilderness wandering. The banks of the Jordan were also a place of transition and succession. It was at the Jordan that Moses passed the baton of leadership to Joshua, It was at the Jordan that the desert prophet Elijah passed the baton of his prophetic mission to Elisha. When John the Baptist, who is strongly associated with Elijah, is introduced to us on the banks of the Jordan, we know that the stage is set for a dramatic new period of history to commence.

Mark's story begins with Jesus initiation into ministry at his baptism. Mark says the veil between heaven and earth tears apart- the division between heavenly and earthly splits open at this initiation as it will be again with his death at Mark's conclusion. Mark's story begins with the Spirit of God, naming and claiming Jesus, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

In this Jewish act of baptism, the Jesus Movement of the first century began while led to Christian faith that would subsequently follow generations later.

What do Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Methodists and Catholics all have in common? We share in the sacrament of baptism as initiation as followers of the way of Jesus. In all of these Christian traditions, with all our differences in polity and theology, our baptismal vows are remarkably similar. We all vow to follow Jesus. and we all name specifically one aspect of what that means. In the Methodist tradition the question is worded, “Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever form they present themselves?” Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Methodists and Catholics all share in one baptism, one call to follow teachings of Jesus which means we vow to spend life studying what Jesus taught which is how to love God, love others, and love enemies *and* resisting that which is not love: evil, injustice and oppression.

With so much to be said about this baptism sorry, I want us to focus this morning on our baptismal pledge, specifically this question. Two thoughts come to mind. First, we must resist evil injustice and oppression. We can find powerful quotes from every generation which echo this wisdom. “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good [people] to do nothing.” — Edmund Burke. “If we are not part of the solution, we are part of the problem.” “Silence is complicity.” Resist evil, injustice and oppression we must if we are followers of Jesus.

But before we launch into a Holy War of Crusades, we must reflect, pause and listen; we must be sure of the Truth. We must be sure that what we are resisting is in fact evil, injustice and oppression: not just something we don’t like, not just something that didn’t go our way, not just not our personal preference, not just someone we don’t get along with, not just someone we’ve heard rumors or gossip about, not just any and everything calls for resistance. There is a whole lot that we don’t like that we just need to live and let live and allow differences and not resistance. What is evil, injustice and oppression?

I think one clue begins by examining who is being harmed by this act that we resist? Does our act benefit the marginalized, the poor, the disenfranchised, “the least, last and lost” as Jesus put it? Can we step back from the situation and see a larger picture? Enter into the spacious mind’ that I have spoken of before. Are we resisting that which is meant for good for others which jeopardizes our privilege? Is our resistance about injustice and how do we know for sure? We must open our minds to hear, check our sources, engage in conversations with those we oppose to hear what they say. We must open our hearts to listen in prayer and meditation in the silence for the still small voice within. Once we have determined that systemic or specific acts are harmful, destructive, inhumane, unjust then we must resist.

Once we have taken up the mantle to bring change, HOW we resist is ESSENTIAL. It is CRUCIAL. **For if we are following the way of Jesus, if our resistance is of our baptismal vows, our resistance must also be the way of Jesus.** We must resist injustice in a way that honors and respects the dignity of all people including those we resist, for they too are images of God. We must resist oppression in a way that brings life and hope not death and despair and fear. We must resist evil in a way that does not make us into that which we resist. I am reminded of the words of Ernest Hemingway:

“Being against evil doesn't make you good. Tonight I was against it and then I was evil myself. I could feel it coming just like a tide... I just want to destroy them. But when you start taking pleasure in it you are awfully close to the thing you're fighting.”— Ernest Hemingway, Islands in the Stream

If our resistance leads us into acts of evil, oppression and injustice, then goodness has not prevailed.

Mark presents John the Baptist and Jesus modeling baptism which we claim. We should not miss out that these baptisms of our ancestors bear national and political significance. John and Jesus are not fixated on personal salvation in the afterlife; that was not of their culture or heritage. This baptism in this story is about something much different. Mark's Old Testament citations and allusions remind his listeners of significant national and political events. John the Baptizer is directly challenging the establishment figures of Israel, the established ministry of the temple and its authorities. John as no authority to be baptizing people; he is not a temple priest. John continues his story by speaking boldly against the tyrannical King Herod. I told you about King Herod last week. King Herod does what he always does when threatened- what men in power do when fearing loss. Herod eliminates the threat. Spoiler alert: John's head will be severed from his body and served on a platter at the king's command because John resisted evil.

John's baptism ceremony where "people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him" crossing the Jordan was an act whereby the nation is renouncing evil and injustice and oppression and preparing for a new way. This crowd of baptized are claiming -reclaiming- national identity and destiny as God's people. People of love, mercy and justice which formed at the Jordan. This is an act bringing the nation back to a source from which its communal life can be reformed. Prophets such as Elijah and Elisha were not only the bringers of a message to their nation, but established and led communities of renewal and challenge within it. John the Baptist and Jesus operate in the same way. as do we who follow in their baptism. ¹

This baptism of John which Jesus participates and then lives and dies for, is about a nation, a society, a whole people, a whole of humanity. It is announcing how they will live and how they will die in order to love God, to love others, all others, friends and enemies. This baptism announces who they will be, as God's holy, sacred people, and it is the same for us today. Our baptism defines us just like theirs does. It shapes who we will be as God's holy, sacred people loving God and all others, and resisting evil, injustice and oppression by the grace of God.

May it be so.

¹Alastair Roberts. <https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-the-individual-mark-14-11/>