

## Mark 1:4-11

Did you recognize the gospel reading this morning? We heard most of it about a month ago, on the second week of Advent, the only difference being the last few verses that were added to this morning's reading regarding the baptism of Jesus.

Don't you love baptisms, especially infant baptisms where the sleeping baby awakes with a start and begins to cry? I once had a colleague who said the cry was because the devil was being chased out of the body. An interesting statement, but I don't believe it is entirely true. True it is the entering of the Holy Spirit into the child, or adult's, body, it is the entrance into the family of God. But that begs the question of the rare child, and the adult, who does not cry; is there no devil present in this person, or has the baptism failed? I personally believe neither is possible. We are born with original sin, and baptism is of God, it does not fail.

There is a difference between the practices in the baptism of John, the baptism of Jesus, and the baptism we practice today in the Lutheran Church. Our baptism is through the Triune God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. John the Baptist tells us that Jesus' baptism is of the Spirit, even though the Bible never records Jesus baptizing anyone. And the baptism Jesus underwent by John was one of repentance, of the forgiveness of sin. This brings up a couple of questions. Why did John baptize Jesus if John didn't feel he was worthy to do so? That's an easy question to answer: Jesus insisted he be baptized by John. Why did Jesus insist he be baptized if he was sin free? That question has a few possible answers.

We know from what we recite in the Apostle's Creed that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Jesus already had the Holy Spirit within him, he didn't need to have the Holy Spirit come down from heaven to enter into his human body, so the Holy Spirit descending like a dove had a different meaning. Could it be that it was an affirmation, along with God's voice that boomed, that Jesus, and we, need to assure us that Jesus is God's son? This could be a possible reason for Jesus to be baptized.

Or, it is possible that Jesus' baptism was necessary because of sin? Not his sin, but the sin of humanity. In those times community was much more intertwined than what our idea of community is today. Although we realize we need to be a part of the family of God, a part of the community, in Jesus' time community extended far beyond the church. The Jewish people lived under the Roman authority, thereby drawing them closer together because of the Roman oppression. It's like the Christian church flourishing in China where, even though it is legal, there is much government opposition to Christianity. When a community is brought together under such pressure there is a greater value to their beliefs, and more of a close-knit relationship between believers. When something happens to one person, it affects everyone in the community. So, when Jesus is baptized for repentance of sin, the baptism and forgiveness of sin is for all people in the community.

Another reason for his baptism could be that this is the launch of Jesus' ministry. Jesus did not begin his ministry until after he was baptized. In the gospels of Matthew and Luke Jesus was sent into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil right after his baptism. He would have needed the strength of God's assurance that was found in his baptism to face these trials. The gospel of Mark has Jesus going into the countryside and finding his disciples following his baptism. He would then travel spreading the Kingdom of God wherever he went. And this could be what our baptism begins, a launch to our mission and ministry. If that is so, take some time to consider what your mission and ministry entails and how you are meeting that purpose.

The final consideration I have for why the baptism of Jesus was important is that it symbolizes, or perhaps prepares us for his death. Today in the Lutheran church we normally baptize by pouring or sprinkling water on the head of the one being baptized. When Jesus was baptized, he was fully immersed in the River Jordan. Picture this. Jesus waded into the water, it wasn't just knee deep, it was at least waist deep. John, holding onto him, forced Jesus under the water, Jesus was fully covered by the water of the Jordan River. This is historically believed to be the same place in the Jordan where the Israelites crossed into new life in the Promised Land. God held back the waters as they crossed on dry land, no one had any chance of drowning.

I almost drowned when I was a child. I was swimming alone in a neighbor's inground pool alone. The neighbor was sitting in her Florida room keeping a close eye on me. I strapped the diving mask on and positioned the snorkel in my mouth. Then I simply walked into the deep water. And I panicked. Even though I could breathe through the snorkel I lost all sense of direction once the water covered my head. I was flailing in water in which I could almost touch the bottom without my head being underwater. When she saw me, the neighbor screamed, and her son flew out of the house and pulled me to safety. It was a terrifying experience.

I learned in seminary being immersed in the baptismal waters signifies being drowned. The water closes over the body like a tomb. But that isn't where it ends. When the person arises from the waters it symbolizes resurrection. As Jesus was resurrected to new life when he arose from the grave, the baptized person from the waters of death to new life in Christ. As Lutherans we believe that baptism is a sacrament that establishes new life in a person, it remakes the person in God's Spirit. It is the death of sin in us and our rebirth into a holy life—Christ's life. Since we are baptized into life with Christ, we have a mission and a ministry that is similar to that of Jesus.

Since in our culture it is not feasible to walk from town to town preaching and healing we are to live out our mission in the community in which we find ourselves. When we are in doubt about where we are supposed to serve it is prayer that will give us the answer. Taking a spiritual assessment and finding your spiritual gifts is a good way to determine where your focus should be.

Perhaps it is singing in the choir or leading a Bible class. Maybe it is visiting the sick and those who are unable to attend worship. It could be that you serve on the church council, work with charity groups such as Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, or the food bank. Or maybe your strength lies in introducing people to Jesus and bringing them to worship services. Whatever it is that you have determined it needs to be carried through with compassion and dedication. God wants people to be involved in studying and applying the Word and to become disciples, serving God and humanity in a meaningful life.

Jesus' baptism, even though it may have seemed as though he didn't need to be baptized, was important to his life as he lived on this earth fully God and fully human. His identity as God's son, beloved and accepted, was important to his ministry. His being a part of the community and symbolically having sin washed away is important to all of us. But most important of all was his defeat of death when he was resurrected from the grave. In Christ Jesus we have new life!

All glory be to God.