

First Things First

Mark 1:4-11

Baptism of the Lord Sunday, January 10, 2021

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What's the first thing you know?

The answer, of course, is *Old Jed's a millionaire*.

If you get that joke, that means either you grew up in the 1960s and watched *The Beverly Hillbillies* Wednesday nights on CBS. Or you came to our staff meeting last fall when I challenged our staff with that profound question.

To be honest, that's not a particularly profound question in light of television trivia; but it is more profound in light of the four gospels of the New Testament. So let's pose that question to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

In Matthew's gospel, the first thing you know Jesus is born the Son of David; he is Emmanuel, God with us. And he is born to a virgin. Yet he was accepted and raised by his stepfather Joseph and was soon visited by Magi from the East.

In Luke's gospel, the first thing you know is that both John the Baptist and Jesus are miraculously conceived. And when Mary delivered her firstborn Son, angels sang his praises and shepherds proclaimed his birth.

In John's gospel, the first thing you know is that Jesus is the Living Word of God; the very embodiment of the Light of Creation. And that Light became flesh and took up residence in the neighborhood of human experience.

But in Mark, the first thing you know, Jesus is baptized. **The first thing you know, Jesus is baptized.** It's as if everything that came before doesn't really matter. There's no birth narrative at all in Mark's gospel; the story simply begins when John baptizes Jesus.

And when Jesus is baptized, Mark tells us that heaven splits open. I don't what that would've looked like. Candice and I have been to Miller Park in Milwaukee, which has a retractable roof that "splits open" to let the warmth and sunlight in.

But heaven is not a mechanical device. And the sky is not a solid entity which might retract. So we don't know what Jesus actually saw when he saw the heavens split open. But we do know that somehow divine revelation was about to happen.

And then the Holy Spirit, like a dove, comes down on Jesus. That doesn't mean the Holy Spirit is a dove or that the Holy Spirit even looks like a dove. Rather, Mark seems to be speaking about the manner in which the Spirit descended upon Christ. And it was gentle, like a dove.

There is no question that the splitting of the heavens and the dove-like descent of the Spirit raise more questions than answers; but there's no question about what happens next: There was a voice from heaven declaring, "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; with you I am well-pleased."

What does it mean for someone to be well-pleased with another person?

Consider a toddler who picks a bouquet of dandelions. He clutches them in his fist so tightly that the moisture from the dandelions stains his hands. And as he gives them to his mother, she smiles at him and says, in her own words, "With you I am well-pleased."

Or consider a young associate responding to a request to meet with her boss. She strides into the office, not sure what her boss has in mind. After sitting down, her boss commends her for her excellent work and then offers her a big promotion with an appropriate bump in salary. And then the boss explains, "With you I am well pleased."

A diner gets up from the table, appreciative of the excellent service he has just received. He pays the bill and leaves a tip. But then he reaches into his pocket, pulls out an extra \$10 and tosses it on the table, adding to the tip he's already left. As he leaves, he waves to the waitress and says, "With you I am well pleased."

What pleased the mother? The boss? The diner? It was something that the toddler had done; it was something the associate had done; and it was something the waitress had done. In other words, their good deeds pleased the mother, the boss, and the diner.

But take a look at Mark's account of the baptism of Jesus: what had he done to please God the Father?

The answer is: Nothing. Jesus hadn't done a thing to "earn" God's blessing at his baptism. In Mark's gospel, Jesus hadn't healed a single leper; he hadn't preached a single sermon; he hadn't forgiven a single sinner and he hadn't fed a single multitude. But God was still pleased with him.

Wait a minute, you say. Wasn't God pleased with Jesus because he was baptized?

I'm sure God was happy that Jesus went to be baptized, but that's not the main reason why God commended him. The real reason why God was pleased with Jesus is that they were in a loving relationship with one another. In fact, the baptism of Jesus was predicated on that loving relationship. And so the voice of God thundered over the waters: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

And the voice of God still thunders over the waters of our baptism—not because of what we have done; for that matter, many of us were baptized as infants, and we had no choice in the decision. But even as infants without a voice or a choice, God loved us, and God declared, "You are my child, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Not because of what we've done, but because of whose we are. For God loved us then and God loves us still.

You see, the Bible's understanding of baptism isn't that baptism is something we do; rather, it's something God does.

Baptism isn't something we do; it's something God does. Baptism is the outward sign that we are in a saving relationship with God. All we do is get wet; God does the saving.

We are not baptized in order to win God's favor. If that were true, then we would be turning baptism into a work, and we are not saved by works. We are saved by grace through faith—and this is not of ourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

We are not baptized in order to win God's favor; we are baptized because we have received God's favor. And there's nothing we have to do or can do in order to receive God's favor.

So what's the first thing we need to know? The first thing we need to know is that God loves us and there's nothing we can do to change that. God blesses us, even though we've done nothing to earn those blessings. God loves because love is God's nature.



Title of my sermon today is “First Things First.” We’ve already explored the first thing you know on *The Beverly Hillbillies* and in each of the four gospels. But every year, the readings for the baptism of the Lord take us back to the opening verses of the Bible in Genesis chapter 1. And if you’re looking for the “first thing you know” and if you want to get “first things first,” then Genesis 1 is a rather good place to start:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

The ancient Hebrews understood the opening verse of the Torah as a picture of chaos. The Hebrews were not a seafaring people; that was left to the ancient Phoenicians. When the Hebrews looked out at the sea, they saw chaos. Look at verse 1: there’s a sense of chaos in the words *formless, empty, darkness, deep*. But what do we find in that beginning chaos? Hovering over the waters of chaos, we find the Spirit of God. Consider Psalm 29:3, “The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord thunders over the mighty waters.” God brings order out of chaos. God triumphs over chaos. And God will always triumph over chaos.

Today we find ourselves at another beginning: a New Year. Looking back over 2020, we saw that it was a year of chaos. Indeed, some of that chaos spilled over into 2021 this past Wednesday with rioting in the US Capitol. But just as the Spirit of God hovered over the chaotic waters at the Creation, so the Spirit of God has been hovering over the chaos of Covid-19 and all that has gone with it.

How about you? Are you finding yourself in a chaotic place? Look at how God has transformed the waters: in the Old Testament, the waters represent chaos. But in the New Testament, the waters of chaos are transformed into the waters of baptism; they’ve become the waters of grace.



It’s the beginning of a New Year; it’s time to get first things first. In Mark’s gospel, Jesus got first things first at the waters of baptism. At the beginning of this New Year, I’d like to invite you to get first things first by remembering your baptism. Every time noted United Methodist pastor and author Adam Hamilton takes a shower, he makes the sign of the cross to remember his baptism.

Consider how you might revisit the waters of your baptism at the beginning of this New Year. As you do, watch for the gentle hovering of the Spirit of God over your life, even in the midst of chaos. Allow the Holy Spirit to descend upon you like a dove. And then listen for the heavens to split open so that you might sense the affirming voice of God declaring, “You are my child; with you, I am well-pleased.”

Let us pray.

Prayer

God of mercy and love, you have called to us over the waters, but we have been slow to hear. You have declared your love for us and called us your child, but we have embraced chaos. Hover over our chaos, we pray, until the waters of confusion have been transformed into the waters of your grace. For you have cleansed and healed us; you have adopted us as your beloved children. Help us to live as children of the light, serving you faithfully all our days. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.