

Were Not the Right Man on Our Side

Mark 1:9-11

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“At that time...” With the briefest of transitions, Mark moves from John the Baptist who came to prepare the way for the Lord to Jesus. Unlike the other three gospels that all have their own way of setting the stage for the coming of Jesus, birth narratives or long theological introductions, in Mark Jesus is immediately at the center of the story, at the center of the gospel. And no sooner does he appear than he is baptized by John in the Jordan. In one action packed verse Jesus makes his initial appearance and then is baptized by John in the Jordan.

John the Baptist had said, **“After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”** And yet when Jesus comes, the one more powerful than John, the one John is not even worthy of untying the thongs of his sandals, the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit, this Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan. Jesus, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit, experiences the baptism of John, which was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As soon as we meet Jesus he immediately experiences the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Something of great significance happens when Jesus is baptized. The baptism of John was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As we explore the pages of the New Testament, the witness about Jesus is of one voice. He was without sin. When Paul refers to the death of Jesus and the incredible blessing it brought for this world, the Apostle writes, **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”** (II Corinthians 5:21) Peter tells the early church that Jesus suffered for them, noting that Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, who wrote, **“He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.”** (I Peter 1:22, reference to Isaiah 53:9) Earlier in the same letter Peter had written about the redemption that was found in Jesus: **“For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from our forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.”** (I Peter 1:18,19) In I John 3:5 the writer affirms, **“But you know that Jesus appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin.”** And in Hebrews, a letter that explores the death of Jesus in great detail, comparing his death to the sacrifice that was offered in the Holy of Holies by the High Priest, the sacrifice of atonement, the preacher proclaims, **“We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.”** (Hebrews 4:15)

If Jesus was the one who had no sin, if he was the lamb without blemish, if he was tempted in every just as we are , but was without sin, then his baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins begs the question, “For whose sins was he baptized?”

The Old Testament prophets called Israel to account because they had failed to love God and they had failed to love their neighbor. If the waters of the Jordan River are symbolic of Israel, those waters were polluted with sin and unrighteousness. They had been fouled by repeated acts of unfaithfulness, by worship of false gods that was idolatrous and a rejection of the true God that was adulterous. The waters carried with them the countless acts of injustice, the offenses against the vulnerable, the weak, the ones on the margin of life. Apparently there was a strong sense by many in Israel that they had failed to live in right relationship with God. “The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to John the Baptist. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.” (Mark 1:5) As their sins were forgiven, even that act of cleansing forgiveness left its mark on the waters of the Jordan.

For everyone else, their entrance into the Jordan brought a measure of cleansing. For Jesus, who was pure and spotless, it could well be that he entered the waters of the Jordan to gather up the sin, to take it up, to carry it, even to cover it. It won't be until much later in the gospel of Mark, until the tenth chapter, until the third time Jesus tells his disciples that he is headed to Jerusalem to die, it won't be until then that Jesus portrays the offering of his life as a ransom, but there are hints of that ransom, in his baptism, hints of that redemption that buys something back at a great price, hints of the unblemished lamb that would be sacrificed, and as Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, hints that “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.”

All these things and more are put into play when Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. When Jesus was baptized he identified with us. He showed beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was one of us. He showed that he is Emmanuel, God with us. All of this was put into play when Jesus entered into the rough and tumble waters of the Jordan River, where sin flowed freely. But there is more. It is not just that Jesus identified with us. His baptism holds out the hope that we who are sinful, we who enter the waters of baptism desperately needing to be cleansed and forgiven, might find not only forgiveness, but a new identity. As Jesus identifies with our sin through his baptism, we hold out hope that our lives can be identified with his righteousness.

What does that mean? “Just as Jesus was coming out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. A voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’” (Mark 1:10,11) The baptism of Jesus is marked by a tearing open of heaven, the coming of the Holy Spirit, and an affirmation from heaven, seemingly from the Father in Heaven, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” If we take the Apostle Paul seriously, as Jesus becomes sin for us...as Jesus identifies with us...we become the righteousness of God. We become identified with Jesus. More than an external washing in the Jordan River, the baptism of Jesus and his identifying with us awakens in us the hope that we will find heaven torn open, that we will have the Holy Spirit descend on us, and that we might hear our Father in Heaven say to us, to you and to me, “You are my son, you are my daughter, whom I love, with you I am well pleased.” The New Testament promises us nothing less. We are now in Christ. His righteousness becomes our righteousness.

Martin Luther’s hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is our God*, recognizes that our striving in life would be losing, but for this one thing. “Were the right man not on our side, the man of God’s own choosing. Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus it is he.” The right man is on our side. Jesus Christ is on our side. He jumped into the waters of baptism. He wasn’t put off by the sin and stench. He didn’t come to call the righteous. He came to call sinners. He came so that his righteousness would become our righteousness.

Jesus demonstrates he is on our side by being baptized by John in the Jordan River. But at this point we need to be cautioned against thinking all we needed was a rinse and wash. His baptism is the beginning. It is not the end. So right from his baptism Jesus is led “at once” into the wilderness, into the desert, where he is tempted for forty days by Satan, a temptation that included being surrounded by wild animals, by beasts. When Jesus identifies with us in his baptism, he is entering a battle that will rage far beyond the banks of the River Jordan. It will take him into the wilderness. It will take him into a time of temptation where he comes face to face with Satan, the enemy of God and the enemy of all that is good. It will take him into deep conflict with religious leaders. It will take him to Jerusalem and the Roman rulers who spend their days saying, “Caesar is Lord.” It will take him into a garden where he will experience the abandonment of God, crying out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” It will take him to the cross, where he will fulfill his word and give his life as a ransom. The depth of his struggle against the powers and principalities alerts us to the depths of human depravity. The good news is that just as he is willing to jump into the waters of the Jordan, he is willing to walk the long dusty road that leads to the cross.

We do well to be cautioned that we needed so much more than a rinse and wash. The road ahead of Jesus will be one of sacrifice and suffering. He will walk that road because he came to take away our old identity of sin and shame. He will walk that road because he came to give us a new identity, children of God, loved by God, and filled with the Holy Spirit. He will walk that road because he loves us and lays down his life for us.

But knowing Jesus will move from the waters of baptism to the wilderness of temptation and then onward on his journey to Jerusalem doesn't mean we have to rush from the waters of baptism. Surely his entrance into those waters made quite a splash. I have been reading and studying in the gospel of Mark for quite a while in anticipation for this series of sermons. There is a place in chapter seven where we are told the crowds were overwhelmed with amazement. This is a good reminder that Jesus came not only to overcome his enemies, he came to overcome our despair with life. People are overwhelmed with amazement because he drove out an impure spirit, healed a leper, healed and forgave a paralyzed man, healed a man with a shriveled hand, taught with authority, commanded the storms with authority, walked on water, fed the multitudes, raised a dead girl and healed a sick woman. So in chapter seven, after he healed a man who was deaf and mute, a man unable to hear or to speak, the people were overwhelmed with amazement. And so they said, "He has done everything well."

I absolutely love that reaction, that reaction of being overwhelmed with amazement, that amazement that leads to a crowd of people marveling that Jesus has done everything well. What if we believed that about Jesus? What if even when he entered the waters of baptism, when he jumped into the Jordan River, what if he even did that well? What if he dove into the waters of baptism and the judges gave him a perfect 10?

What would it have been like to swim with Jesus that day in the waters of baptism, in the waters of the Jordan River? Did he put a little Moses into action, dividing the waters? Did he do some Joshua, causing the river to back up and leave a dry spot on the ground? Did he test out that ability we know he had to walk on the water? If there was a wedding on shores of the Jordan, did he fill a stone jar from the waters of the Jordan and leave it innocently at the reception, watching playfully to see if someone asked, "Where did you get this wine? You saved the best until last." Did he splash and play with children? Did he lift some up on his shoulders and launch them high into the air? Was there a moment when he called a few gentle souls to sit beside the waters with him, the quiet waters that come at the end of the day, and without even knowing the fullness of the sacred moment they were experiencing fill their hearts with the peace that comes from knowing, "He leadeth me beside the still waters"?

What I really want to know is whether he might have found a special person who seemed to be struggling, who seemed to be alone, who seemed to have a heavy heart, maybe a person judged by the world, maybe a person judged by themselves, but a person who just didn't feel their life had any purpose, any meaning, any hope, any future. As the waters grew completely calm, and you could see the reflection in the water of the trees and the clouds and the colors of the leaves, I wonder if he might have pulled that lost and lonely soul by his side and asked them to look in the water. Did he ask them to look at their reflection? They might have even pulled away, knowing that when they saw their own reflection they saw failure. When they saw their own reflection all they saw was rejection. But not this day. This day when they looked they saw their reflection, and next to their own face they saw the face of Jesus. With words only he could deliver, a gentle hand wrapped around their shoulder, I wonder if Jesus might have said, "Believe in me, my dear friend. One day my reflection will be your reflection. One day my righteousness will be your righteousness. One day my beauty will be your beauty."

There was still a long way to go for Jesus, and he would have to walk the whole path so that his righteousness could become our righteousness, so that his reflection could be our reflection, so that his beauty could be our beauty. But now, because Jesus walked all the way to the cross, the waters of his baptism become the waters of our baptism. When he jumped into the waters of baptism, our journey of salvation literally sprang to life. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (II Corinthians 5:21)

Fred Craddock was a well-known preacher, and he told a story that reminds me a lot about the baptism of Jesus. It is a story that actually needs to be baptized, to be cleaned up a bit, because he uses a word that isn't very polite. The word he uses is bastard. The story Fred Craddock tells is about a boy from a small town who was born out of wedlock and the other kids taunted and teased him by calling him a bastard. Bastard is a mean word and it is a cruel word. Sometimes our past is made up of mean and cruel words that others have called us, maybe even that we have called ourselves, labels we wear and can't seem to let go of. When we look in the waters of life, we see reflections of those negative things. But that reflection can change, because Jesus has come to the waters of baptism.

Fred tells how he and his wife Nettie were in the Smoky Mountains in a little town called Cosby, near Gatlinburg. They were having a meal at the Black Bear Inn which has a great scenic view of the mountains out a big picture window. Early in the meal an elderly man approached the Craddock's table and said 'Good Evening'.

Fred and his wife were hoping to have a quiet meal, but Fred said good evening back, and they had a conversation. Along the way the elderly man asked what Fred did. Fred said, “I am a Christian minister.”

The man asked--- ‘Which church?’

Fred said ‘The Christian church’.

The man paused and then said: “I owe a great deal to a minister of the Christian church.’

The man said: “I grew up in these mountains. My mother was not married and the whole community knew it. I was what was called in those days an illegitimate child, in fact they called me that ugly name—a bastard. In those days that was shameful, and I was ashamed. The reproach that fell on my mother fell also on me. When I went into town I could see people staring at me, making guesses as to who my father was. At school the children said ugly things to me, so I stayed to myself at recess and at lunch.

In my early teens I began to attend a little church back in the mountains called Laurel Spring Christian Church. It had a minister who was both attractive and frightening. He had a chiseled face, a deep voice, and a heavy beard. I went to hear him preach, I don’t know exactly why, but it did something for me. Because of my background I was afraid I was not welcome, since I was, as they put it, a bastard. I would go just in time for the sermon and then quickly leave before someone could ask me—what’s a boy like you doing here?

One Sunday however I got trapped in the aisle, there were too many adults in front of me leaving, and I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder. It was that minister. I caught a glimpse of his beard and face and knew. I trembled in fear. He turned his face around so he could look me in the eye, and seemed to be staring at me for ever so long. I knew what he was doing—he was sizing me up in order to guess who my father was. A moment later he said--- “well boy you are a child of...” and he paused there. I just knew what was coming, I just knew I would have my feelings hurt—again! I knew I would never go back to that church again. But then he said ‘Boy, you are a child of---- God! I see a striking resemblance, boy.’ Then he swatted me on the bottom and said ‘Now go claim your inheritance.’ I left church a different person that day. In fact really that was the beginning of my life. I had been found, and found out, and I found out who I was.”

Fred Craddock says that he was so moved by the story that he asked the man “What’s your name?”

The man said “Ben Hooper”

Fred then said—“I suddenly recalled that my own father had once told me when I was just a child how the people of Tennessee had twice elected as governor a ‘bastard’ named Ben Hooper.”

The story ends with a nice twist. The little boy grew up to be governor. But that is not the best part. The best part, the part of this story that is gospel, the part of this story that is the good news of Jesus Christ, is that this little boy who was taunted and teased and ashamed and humiliated, this little boy one day had someone who grabbed him, someone who pulled him to their chest, someone who looked him in the eye, and someone who whispered in his ear, “You are a child of God.” And ever after, that little boy knew he belonged. That little boy knew he was loved. I hope you know it too. Your past does not define you. You have a new identity in Jesus Christ.

Today Jesus invites us to come to the Jordan River. Come stand with him and look deep into those waters of baptism. There is a reflection in those waters. It is a reflection of what God sees when he sees you. He sees you, and he sees me, as his beloved daughter, his beloved son, his beloved child. When he sees you and me, God sees the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Because of Jesus Christ, heaven is torn open for us. The Holy Spirit descends on us, the Holy Spirit fills us. And our Father in Heaven cries out joyfully, “You are my beloved child whom I love. With you I am well pleased.”

I think of all this and more when Mark tells us, “At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.”