

Mark 1: 4-11 Baptism of the Lord

The passage we read from Mark this morning is the first event described about the actual beginning of Jesus' ministry as an adult. Because Mark's introduction to his narrative does not include any information about Jesus' life and activities prior to this point, it seems that Mark feels that the factual statement giving Jesus' identity is sufficient. Mark uses this event as the clearest way to introduce his audience to Jesus, who Jesus is and what Jesus' actions are about. When reading that first verse it is easy to assume that Mark is explaining that this is the beginning of his narrative. But I think that phrase "this is the beginning" is more meaningful than that. Mark is saying this is how Jesus began his ministry on earth. Jesus began to claim his mission by going to John the Baptizer. The other three gospel accounts also reference this interaction between John the Baptizer and Jesus at the Jordan as the beginning of Jesus' ministry, but each describes it in a slightly different manner. Mark's gospel's opening three verses are direct and to the point. Paraphrased the first verse states the following: "I am going to tell you the good news of this man Jesus, who is the Christ, the son of God". Mark's narrative begins with the actions of Jesus. Mark evidently doesn't feel his audience needs to know anything else about the one he declares is the anointed one of God, Christos in Greek. Mark doesn't give any background about Jesus' heritage or place in the history of Judaism. There is no information about Jesus' life prior to this moment when he comes to the River Jordan. But the fact that Jesus has appeared is declared to be evangel or good news/glad tidings. That point is paramount. The next two verses are a prelude to the introduction of John the Baptist; they are familiar because of their relationship to the scroll of the prophet Isaiah which declared there would be a voice in the wilderness preparing the way for the Lord. John's appearance in the wilderness is the clue which tells the people God is paying attention to them and they need to act. This morning's passage begins with the description of John the Baptist which places him within the context of Isaiah's words—John is a voice crying out in the wilderness, calling the people to repent and return to the ways of the Lord. Mark's description of John is very detailed. He is a man living on the edge of society, not a member of the religious establishment. Yet "the people from the whole Judean countryside, as far away as Jerusalem are coming to him in order to confess their sins. John is thus presented as a powerful figure. He proclaims a baptism of repentance. One question for us is to understand what was John proclaiming that drew so many to hear him? Our text tells us he was proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The use of water for purification was a long standing tradition in Judaism. When visiting archeological sites in Israel you will find near any site associated with worship a structure called a Miqva'ot or religious bath. These structures reflect the concern of the time for ritual cleansing. Ritual cleansing was required for all manner of reasons, often not related to what we would consider moral or ethical ones. Ritual cleansing was necessary if you touched something declared unclean under Levitical Law, for example. To those who came to John a baptism would thus have been a ritual bathing. A baptism for repentance would be a ritual bathing which followed repentance. Repentance doesn't just mean remorse about something, but means turning toward a new direction. In Hebrew the root of the word means to literally turn 180 degrees away from the direction that you were heading; to walk in the opposite direction. In Greek the basis of the word is to have a change of mind. This about face in direction that John proclaimed was a return to the ways of the Lord.

This return to the ways of the Lord would result literally in the sending away of sins, or as our translations today say, the forgiveness or pardon of those things done which were not in accordance to the way of the Lord. So John's baptism had two components: repentance and forgiveness. But this was not the entirety of John's message. Just before we have the verses relating that Jesus came to him this additional message is recorded: 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me' and 'I have baptized you with water but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'" John was telling those who came to hear his message that the baptism which he offered was just the beginning of their return to God's ways. In his own mind, the need for the people to repent is the first step needed to be taken but there was more to come. Jesus represented that more powerful baptism. Mark's narration simply states that in those days that John was proclaiming the need for repentance that "Jesus came down from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." Unlike Matthew who indicates that John was reluctant to baptize Jesus because he knew who Jesus was. Mark does not record any conversation between John and Jesus. Mark does not indicate that John the Baptist recognized Jesus as the one whose way was being prepared by his proclamation. Mark also gives no reason for Jesus seeking out John at the Jordan. Jesus just comes to John and is baptized. But in the description of what happens when Jesus comes up out of the water we have our first description of a baptism by the Spirit. Verse 10-11: "And 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. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." This baptism of the Spirit was God's claim upon Jesus. Although the scripture says that the heavens were torn apart, there is no description that anyone besides Jesus noticed this at the time. The voice from heaven spoke directly to Jesus as the pronoun used is masculine singular. Mark tells us that there are two types of Baptisms: the lesser one being the Baptism of Repentance which involves our actions. We repent and turn toward God. The second baptism is the one of the Spirit. It requires no action on our part. In that baptism we are claimed by God as beloved children just as we are. When we celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism or remember our own that is what we celebrate: That we are claimed by God through the Holy Spirit. Baptism is a message from God to us that we loved. Baptism is a message that tells us our sins are forgiven not because of the baptism, but because God chooses to love and forgive. Through Baptism we become part of a body of believers that tries to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. If we consider Baptism as only the forgiveness of sins and commitment to follow Jesus, we have left out the actions of the Holy Spirit. Through Baptism, we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit which draws us into a dynamic and growing relationship with God Almighty which although it begins with Baptism does not end until we die, and maybe not even then. The Baptism of the Spirit does not leave us as we are, but empowers us to make that about face and live differently. So as we consider this text today, we need to think about this baptism of the Spirit—this claim which God makes upon us—not because we are worthy—not because we repent, but because God loves. Thanks be to God.