

FOUR GLIMPSES INTO THE LIFE OF JESUS

1. "Baptism: When We Hear the Voice of God"

Mark 1:9-15

February 22, 2015, First Sunday in Lent

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Lent is a time of going slower, of slowing down. Unlike the other major holiday, Advent and Christmas, there is not so much to do at least at the beginning of the days of Lent. It is a season to do something for yourself spiritually. A time maybe to join a Small Group or join a Dinner for 8 group or renew your daily devotions that you might have dropped during the busyness of the Christmas rush. Lent is about a closer look at our faith. A time to reflect. A time of penitence and forgiveness. In our gospel lesson Mark tells us that John the Baptist is offering a baptism for repentance and forgiveness of sins. Frederick Buechner says, "to repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, 'I'm sorry' than to the future and saying 'Wow!'" (Wishful Thinking: a Theology of ABC, Buechner, 1973, pg. 79) Mark ends this text by having Jesus say, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news."

Most of us believe the Jesus story is true, that a person named Jesus really lived in the part of the world we call today the Middle East or Israel, that he was a teacher and gathered a group of disciples around him, and after a period of 1-3 years was crucified and put to death by the civil authorities, the Roman Government, for being a trouble maker or claiming to be King of the Jews.

Outside of the Bible there are mentions of Jesus in secular literature of the time, not chapters, but pages that identify him and his followers as a sub group of Judaism during the turbulent times of revolution in the first century A.D. when at least two revolts were led against the Roman rule.

Most of us believe the story of Jesus but, "have never internalized that story and have not experienced Jesus." We have knowledge about Jesus, we could probably write down a dozen things about Jesus in the next five minutes if I asked you to do so. But have you thought about experiencing Jesus?

During these Sundays in Lent, in these "Four Glimpses into the Life of Jesus" as our Sermon Series title suggests I will lead us through four stories where Jesus experienced real life situations like you and I do every day.

Today, it is the story of his baptism and the events immediately following. We don't know why Jesus laid down his carpenter tools and headed to the Jordan River to hear John. Mark only helps us by saying, "In those days...." In the days when John the Baptist was preaching and all of Judea was going out to hear him and being baptized and confessing their sins. John was holding

what we would call a revival. Why did Jesus go? Maybe it was for the same reason why you and I go out to see the latest marvel in music or sport. To hear “Wide Spread Panic” when they come to town or Jason Aldean... or run over to the stadium on picture day to see the latest UGA football phenomes.

Why did Jesus go? Maybe he and John were friends, or maybe they had never laid eyes on each other. Luke tells us that they were about the same age, John being about 6 months older. Luke also tells us that Elizabeth the old woman, John’s mother and Mary the young woman, Jesus’ mother were kinfolk and so maybe that had played together as children. Remember your childhood friends? What became of them?

But one day Jesus shows up at the river Jordan probably near the old city and oasis of Jericho. He listened to John preach and then stepped forward to be baptized. I don’t think he was just following the crowd. I think Jesus knew exactly what he was doing when he stepped forward that day to ask John to baptize him for the forgiveness of sins.

Now, I know that is a problem for some. After all our tradition says that Jesus was like us in all ways except he was without sin. So why would Jesus ask to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins? Matthew tries to explain that away in his gospel when he has John saying, “You should be baptizing me.” And Jesus answers by saying something like, “Go ahead, we need to get this done to fulfill all righteousness,” whatever that means. Luke and John note that Jesus was baptized but only say Jesus was baptized like others who sought out John.

John was holding a religious revival and Jesus wanted to be part of it is one way of putting it. My friend Richard Cromie went to hear Billy Graham preach one night out in Hollywood back in the 1950’s. He was just curious what Billy was doing and saying. Richard was a Christian and already in seminary but he was curious. He had no intentions of going forward when the invitation was given, imagine a blue blooded Presbyterian, but that is what he found himself doing after the sermon, during the invitation to come and commit or re-commit your life to Jesus. Funny things happen when we are in the presence of a charismatic figure!

John preached and issued an invitation and Jesus came forward. Maybe he was thinking about all the times he had misbehaved as a child, the nasty things all of us say at one time or another to our parents, or maybe it was a playmate he had abused or made fun of or bullied (after all if you think you are the son of God it would be easy wouldn’t it?) or maybe he had done something in the carpentry shop he wasn’t so proud of? I don’t know, but for some reason he came forward—maybe he came forward to re-commit his life to God, a life already well lived.

Some of us, many of us Presbyterians were baptized when we were infants and only remember what others told us about our baptism. I was 2 years old my parents told me when I was baptized and the church was between ministers and the temporary supply minister was blind who baptized me so the elder had to guide the minister’s hand to the water and then to the top of my head. You might have a picture that someone took or maybe a video. If you were baptized after age 4 you probably have a memory of the event. What was it like for you? Do you still feel the water sometimes on the top of your head? Did the water drip down your face? Did you expect to feel different? Were you congratulated? Was there a party? I think there should always be a party after a baptism.

Jesus came up out of the River Jordan dripping wet. It is a good metaphor for all your sins being washed away. It doesn't say in Mark or any of the other gospels if it was a sunny day but I am betting it was. The warm rays of the sun touching his body as he stepped out of the cold water of the river would be a reminder of the warmth of God's love. I bet John was wet too. You don't take a grown man down under the water without getting wet yourself. Remember this was not a Christian baptism that John was doing, it was a baptism for repentance and forgiveness so the words would have been different. I wonder what he said to Jesus? Did Jesus have to take an oath, answer any questions?

When something important happens to you do you ever have a private moment that is just for you? You get a promotion at work and the boss calls you from her private line to tell you how great it is to have you on board in your new job. You get straight A's on your report card and your Mom has your favorite meal prepared. You join the church and you have that special something wash over you that feels like "Yes I have done the right thing!"

Something like that happened to Jesus. He sees the heavens torn open, a dove descending and sitting on his shoulder and he hears a voice saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." All of this addressed to Jesus and no one else. Now, you might say, "nothing like that happened to me. Believe me if it had happened someone would have told me. I didn't see into heaven, there was no dove, no voice." So, how is that like Jesus?

What is God doing here in this story of Jesus where the heavens are torn open, a dove dives down to Jesus' shoulder and a voice says, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." What is going on?

Isn't God affirming Jesus? He is saying, "this Jesus fellow is alright." I will concede that most of us don't see what Jesus saw that day. But, were we looking for it? Probably not. I am not being critical here but most of us when we are involved with a baptism are so into how cute the baby is or how nice it is that this child/teenager, adult is being baptized that we get lost in thinking about the process and little about what might be happening.

What is happening when Jesus is baptized is Jesus is being affirmed. God is affirming Jesus as his Son whom he loves and with whom he is well pleased. I think the same thing happens when we are baptized. Baptism is the sign and seal of God's grace and our response.

The "sign and seal of God's grace" we are saying or our parents/guardian/whomever brought you forward for baptism is saying, "I want to acknowledge that I belong to God" or "we want this child to be acknowledged as belonging to God." God does not allow that to go passively by, God has something to say about that. God in some way acknowledges it when we are sealed into God's grace. Jesus saw more because I think he expected to see and hear something.

A few years Professor Harvey Cox, ([The Secular City](#)), made a journey to Israel and visited the Jordan River. He writes, *I had been forewarned, of course, that, while no one has the least idea of the actual location where the baptism of Jesus took place, each guide has a favorite area where he or she can tell the story of Jesus' immersion by John and the riders can stretch their legs and gawk at the river. So I knew it was probably not the exact spot ... but I was taken in anyway. After all, it might be the spot. It did happen somewhere nearby. So I felt compelled to go*

beyond just the customary snapshot ... I took off my shoes and socks, rolled up my trousers, and strode in, first to my ankles, then to my knees, then up over the hems of my trousers to my thighs.

At first my fellow tourist smiled and made humorous comments. Then a kind of appalled silence fell over them. I had told two of them about my being baptized by immersion, and they probably wondered whether I was going to repeat the entire performance right before their eyes. I did not. After a few moments of standing in the Jordan, my toes caressing the sand and the pebbles, I turned and sloshed out. The other bus riders breathed a sigh of relief. They welcomed me ashore almost the way the aging deaconesses had helped me out of the baptismal pool at the little Baptist church some forty-five years ago. As we climbed back in the bus and continued north, however, the subject of the conversation changed dramatically. We talked about Jesus. (Many Mansions, A Christian's encounter with Other Faiths, Cox, 1988, pg. 100-01)

Baptism is a continuous and life long experience. It affirms who we are, warm and wonderful children of God—the heavens quake, the doves flutter and the voice of God echoes across heaven when each child of God—regardless of the age is baptized. What affect has your baptism had on your life?

Let me suggest that for part of your Lent journey you go home and write down the story of your baptism. Whatever you remember or whatever others have told you. Write it down and then look at the symbols involved: the water, the place you were baptized, who was there, what the font or baptistery or stream looked like, the person saying the words over you and see how many symbols you have in common with Jesus' baptism. Experience Jesus anew in your life—not just knowledge about Jesus—but how you experience Jesus in your daily life.