

Baptism of Jesus
Psalm 29: 1-11; Acts 19:1-7;
Mark 1:4-11

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John was there in the wilderness, and all the people were coming to him. The whole countryside must have known who John was. We don't know if this was a little bit of hyperbole or not, but if all of Jerusalem and the countryside were coming and confessing, repenting their sins, they must have had some sense of their sinfulness or some sense that something was holding them back, keeping them from the promises of God.

It's a pretty common human experience to know our own failures, to know our sin, and to have a sense that it gets in the way of us and God. We need repentance. But I've always wondered, why did Jesus come for a baptism from John? Did Jesus need to repent? Our sense is that Jesus really didn't need to repent of anything, so why is he there? Is it just a symbol of him changing from being a builder of some kind, a carpenter or stonemason, to being a rabbi? Perhaps there is something he is shedding, something he is washing off as well.

You see, I don't think you can grow up in a particular culture or society without experiencing and being encased in what we might call some kind of structural sin. Cultural sin. Societal sin. What do I mean by that? An easy description of that is something like a caste system that puts people in different categories and says some people are worth a lot and some people are worth nothing. That's a structural sin in my understanding of the way God sees us.

Certainly, Jesus growing up in his own culture could experience that kind of structural sin. Jews and Gentiles were at odds. I don't think it is too strong a word to use to say the Jews hated the Samaritans. That could have been a societal sin, simply to deny another group of people the right to be people. So maybe as Jesus came, he was not only doing this to move from being in one kind of profession to another, but he was shedding the sin of the culture to walk in a new light, the new light he brings, the calling that he was given. Maybe he came so that he could not only help us recognize our need for forgiveness, which we often recognize ourselves, but to help us enter into that forgiveness.

It was a refocusing of Jesus' life, and now he's bringing the power of God. That's what John is saying, "The one more powerful than I is coming, and he will bring God with him." Now when people heard that the one to come was more powerful than John, I expect there was some thought that the kind of power he was bringing was that he was going to create an army and throw the Roman oppressors out. He would come and make Israel once again the first among nations. They would be able to impose in Israel something like the vision the Pharisees had for their religious state. So, they may have been a little surprised.

As I think about that, the way that people in Jesus' day may have thought Jesus was coming as one who would triumph over the oppressive Romans, I wonder if we

sometimes think about Jesus' power in similar ways. It certainly seems to have been on display this past week. A group of people thinking that that's what Jesus' power would do. Somehow there is an oppressive government and they needed Jesus to take over.

How easy it is for us to set up our own expectations of Jesus and ask Jesus to solve the problems the way we think they should be solved. I think we have to be careful about that. We have a pretty good track record of solving problems only to create new problems. We don't see the effect of one problem over another. For example, we often look at the idea that if we could just get rid of the oppressor and those people who are the problem, everything would be better. Isn't that what Hitler told his people? We'll just use violence to get rid of the oppression and we will eradicate those people who were the problem – war and genocide. I think we have to be really careful with our tendency to go towards violence and genocide.

John doesn't talk about any of that. John doesn't suggest that Jesus, more powerful than he, is going to bring an army to overcome the problems of the world. What's he bringing? He's bringing a baptism of the Holy Spirit. It's a very different approach. The sense is that we have that idea of repentance and the forgiveness of sins, and God can do that. But Jesus can do more than that. Jesus brings God to us, engages us directly with God in the Holy Spirit. It doesn't solve all the problems of the world by force or removal, but invites us to find that the problems of the world can be engaged, and we will be enabled once we engage with God. Jesus brings forgiveness and a new relationship with God, and as God in this passage describes Jesus as, "My beloved Son, the one with whom I am well pleased," there's one other aspect I think that is in this.

Yes, there is repentance and forgiveness. There is a receiving of the Holy Spirit, a wonder that God is now present with us and available to us in a way we didn't expect. But when God describes Jesus like this, there is, I believe, an invitation for us to also respond to Jesus, to follow him, and to begin to find out and to know what that might mean for us to be Jesus' disciples. That's what Mark is beginning here. He is inviting us to recognize that in God giving us both the opportunity to repent and know forgiveness, and to have the Spirit to come close and be with us and engage us, that we can respond.

The initial response, I believe, is to follow Jesus and begin to listen to him, to hold onto him. In Hebrews, it tells us Jesus will be the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Jesus will lead us into what faith truly is, where hope truly lies, and where love is truly given. This passage is an invitation in the midst of all the troubles of our world to see things differently by seeing Jesus first, by following him. And we find that he brings us around the table and reveals to us that we are all children of God and that we are all invited to know what he brings. Bread and wine. The very things that sustain us.

We look to Jesus to find what we need to live -to find the faith that will guide us, the hope that draws us on, and the love that makes life worth living. This passage invites us again to recognize who Jesus is—the Son of God, the Beloved, the one we might just want to find out more about and to follow. Amen.