

Baptism Riches

Trinity CRC, January 28, 2018 PM
Baptism of Heath Haarsma

Mark 1:9-13

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Dear Family of God,

What's it like to hold a baby in your arms? It might depend on whose baby it is. Ask John and Cassie if they love holding little Heath and I'm pretty sure the answer is yes, almost every time! Now ask a stranger to hold baby Heath, particularly when he's crying or his diaper is full and stinky, and you'll probably meet someone who is less than thrilled to hold this child.

When Patsy and I were still kids—no, we were 23—the Lord blessed us with our first baby. She's 30 now. We were living in a mobile home at Dordt College. I would sometimes come home from class and Patsy would have just put tiny Rachel down for a nap in a little cradle in our livingroom. I would see her laying there—the baby, not Patsy—and pick her up and just hold her tight. Patsy would try to stop me and say, "Don't! She's sleeping!" But I didn't listen. I just wanted to hold Rachel for a minute. I was so full of love for that kid.

In a way, it didn't make any sense. I'd been an uncle 18 times by then. I'd held many nephews and nieces. And I love them all. I had fun with them and enjoyed playing with them. Yet I never before had the urge to grab a sleeping baby and just squeeze her tight. But they weren't my own. They belonged to my brothers and sisters. Somehow the love for my own child was automatically deeper.

I think about that when I read our text this morning and when I witness another baptism. In our Bible reading, Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River. And a voice comes out of heaven—it's the voice of God the Father—and says,

Mk 1:11b "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Another translation—or paraphrase—says,

"You are my wonderful son; you make me very glad."—NT Wright

Love for Us Because of Jesus

Congregation, what child does not long to hear those words of love from his or her parent? We all want that. We all need that. And in God the Father we have that. In Christ Jesus we are given that gift of belonging to God and assurance that he would stoop over our crib, pick us up, cuddle us, and say, "You are my child, whom I love. You make me very glad."

Baptism is that reminder for us. Jesus' baptism is marked by several interesting events. The first one that Mark mentions is in v.10:

Mk 1:10 As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open...

The Greek word is "schizo" meaning *ripped open*. Mark could have used a less violent word, *anoigo*, which just means open. But he goes with *torn* or *ripped* open.

The opening of the heavens occurs in the Old Testament too. At the calling of Ezekiel in chapter 1:1 we read, “*The heavens were opened and I saw visions of God*”. Heaven opening is usually a sign that God is about to speak or act and that we will get a quick peek at God’s purposes. However, Mark describes heaven being torn open (*schizo*), not just opened. And that’s significant. You see, if I open a door, I can close it again. But if I rip the door open and tear it off its hinges, that is not so easy to simply close again. Mark wants us to see that when Jesus comes out of the water all heaven breaks loose (Minear, *Mark*, 50). Interestingly, Mark uses this verb again near the end of his gospel to describe the temple curtain torn from top to bottom at Jesus’ death (Mk 15:38). These are instances where God doesn’t just come into the world smoothly and calmly. He breaks in in new and powerful ways. This “schizo” of God is significant.

In addition, we learn from the OT that Joshua (Josh. 3:7–17; 4:14–17), Elijah (2 Kings 2:8), and Elisha (2:14) each parted the Jordan River as a symbol of their God-given authority. However, God shows Jesus to be one greater than the prophets of old for Jesus does not stand by the Jordan and part it; instead, as Jesus comes up out of the Jordan, something far greater is parted: heaven. As Bible scholar Donald Juel in his book *Master of Surprise* says, “...the image may suggest that the protecting barriers are gone and that God, unwilling to be confined to sacred spaces, is on the loose in our own realm.” This is not simply a picture of God being more accessible to us. No, this is God coming into our lives whether we choose him or not.

Isaiah 64:1 says, “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!” Now at the baptism of Jesus, God comes. He comes because his Son is here to redeem the world. Heaven breaks forth so that earth will take note.

Properly understood, baptism is a sign of the covenant. And that means it’s God’s sign to us, first of all and primarily. There is a vow by the parent or parents when a baby is baptized. And that vow sounds very similar to what you might hear in a church that has infant dedications. But what we must hear in baptism is God’s vows to us! God is the primary actor. God comes and breaks through the wall of our sin and says, “I love you. I embrace you. I call you mine.

You see, baptism brings us back to the time when God made a covenant with Abraham to be a God to him and to his descendants after him. And God put a mark of the covenant on his people. I can’t say it strongly enough: We need God to make the first move in drawing us back into fellowship with him after we fell into sin. We need God to make the first move in drawing us back into fellowship with him after we fell into sin. That’s what baptism signifies. God making the first move. It’s a sign of God’s love.

It’s a sign of a new reality bursting into the old world. God has broken into our world in the person of Jesus. By God’s grace, we now see ourselves the way God sees us—with the same eyes that he sees his Son. Theologian NT Wright says, “when the living God looks at us, at every baptized and believing Christian, he says

to us what he said to Jesus on that day. He sees us, not as we are in ourselves, but as we are in Jesus Christ. It sometimes seems impossible, especially to people who have never had this kind of support from their earthly parents, but it's true: God looks at us, and says, 'You are my dear, dear child; I'm delighted with you.' [Hear] that sentence slowly, with your own name at the start, and reflect quietly on God saying that to you, both at your **baptism** and every day since." Hear it: 'You... Kim, Margaret, Ria, Julie are my dear, dear child; I'm delighted with you.' 'You Sam, Heath, Craig, John are my dear, dear child; I'm delighted with you.'" God tears open—heaven—to come to us with a new reality. He's not content to leave us in doubt about how he feels about us. He wants us to know the lengths he'll go to love us. He'll tear open heaven. He'll send his own Son. He'll mark us with the same sign of the covenant that his dearly loved Son received so that we can know God is for us!

Our world constantly tears us down. It grinds us down. All we often hear, in our mind's ear, is how we don't measure up. Rather than hearing doors being torn open in love, we hear them slammed shut in our face. I was listening to a man who grew up with a very abusive mother. For years he lived under her oppression. And he hated her. His identity was wrapped up in hating this woman who had hurt him so badly. He wanted to label himself as his dad's boy but not as his mother's son. This led to a very conflicted sense of identity that was healed when he allowed God to help him forgive his mom and find his identity in Christ as a child of God.

God doesn't look at the labels we put on people or allow people to put on us or that we even put on ourselves. He looks at the head of the covenant, his Son, who he marked with the covenant sign. And he looks at all those in the covenant family marked with his sign. He sees us through Christ-coloured glasses and calls us his sons and daughters, anointed by the Holy Spirit.

Any other label that is hung on us is incomplete or completely wrong. What we need to remember is that we are children of God.

We are Equipped for Service

And since we are God's, we are anointed and set apart for God's purposes in this world. We are equipped for service. Baptism reminds us that we are empowered by God to fulfill his purposes, no matter where we are or who we've been told we are.

The interesting thing about our Bible reading is getting to v.12 where we read this:

Mk 1:12 At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert,

A more literal translation says,

*Mk 1:12 All at once **the Spirit pushed him out** into the desert.*

¹³ and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended (or waited on) him.

It sounds rather harsh to think that the Holy Spirit pushed the Lord Jesus into the desert. But that's what the Holy Spirit does sometimes. In love, he pushes

us where God needs us. He pushes us into places where we will grow in greater dependence on God and his grace. We don't always like it at the time, but we realize later that the Lord was at work in us. We needed a push. We grew through a new challenge.

If the Lord Jesus needed to be pushed into the desert, how much more don't we at times need a push. We need a nudge—sent in love—to get us to the place where God is shaping, challenging, refining, and growing us in faith and joy as we learn to trust and obey.

Sometimes the Spirit pushes us by bringing someone new into the church. Sometimes a son or daughter brings home a friend or potential spouse who stretches us. Sometimes it's a challenge at work that really annoys us for a while. It could be a class at school or a new school or teacher or student. We get pushed into new places and situations that we would not think to choose because it'll bring stress or just change into our lives that we don't think we want. But the promise of God for his covenant people is that he does not abandon us when he pushes us. Just think about what we see in our Bible reading as Jesus is baptized.

First of all, the Holy Spirit dwells in us, just as he came to rest on Jesus in the form of a dove at his baptism. That was a sign for everyone to see. God lives in us. We are anointed with the Holy Spirit. We have God's strength in us!

In addition, we see in the text that Jesus

Mk 1:13 he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

That's a very interesting mix of things. And what we learn there is that God only puts us into difficult situations for a season. It could be a short time. It could be a long time. But 40 days is code for a full amount of time, whatever it might be. Just the right length to accomplish what God has in mind.

When Hennie sent out the bulletin to everyone on Friday, it was still snowing, probably reaching 20 cm at that point. So she included this funny graphic. A man shovelling "Enough Already" into the snow, presumably so that God could read it! And it's true that we sometimes feel that way. We want to tell God that we've had enough of our struggle. But only God knows what enough truly is because he's the one who is doing something new and good in our lives. It could be refining, strengthening, stretching or anything else. He's up to something good so that we can be of greater service to his kingdom in this world.

Maybe it was through being labeled a certain way that we came to see our real identity in Christ and can now help others see Christ's love and power. God works through all the things we go through, even—and especially—the stuff that's very hard.

In addition, just as Jesus was tempted by Satan, we are. The word for *tempt* is the same as the word *test*. God does not tempt us, but he lets Satan come and tempt us. And that serves in God's providence to test us. And tests are always

about making us better, stronger, and more productive in God's kingdom. Similarly, the reference to *wild animals* helps us see that these can be scary experiences. No doubt about it.

But then comes the final line: *and angels attended him. Or waited on him.* That signals to us that hardships can bend us but they can't break us. Satan can tempt us and we can be frightened during this time. But God has his guardian angels in place to get us through—to encourage us, to protect us, to perhaps even open our eyes to see what God is doing. It all works, however, to make us more effective servant in God's kingdom. And that's where we will find great joy and peace in our life.

Look again at Jesus. When he came out the desert, he was equipped for service. Some say, "The road Jesus must tread, precisely because he is God's dear son, is the road that leads through the dry and dusty paths, through temptation and apparent [attacks and] failure." It was that way for Israel as she came out of Egypt only to face 40 years in the desert. But then she was ready for the Promised Land. So it often is for us as well.

Think back to the guy I mentioned earlier who had a very abusive mother. Again, "If we start the journey imagining that our God is a bully, an angry threatening parent ready to yell at us, slam the door on us, or kick us out into the street because we haven't quite made the grade, we will fail at the first whisper of temptation. But if we remember the voice that spoke those powerful words of love—You are my dearly loved child—we will find the way through." God will get us through. Baptism is God's way of saying, "I'll always be here for you. So when you go through trials, look for me. I broke open heaven for you to be my dear child. I'm for you today and always. Indeed, God has given us in baptism a sign of his promise to be with us always and to be faithful.

When we wake up in the morning we need to remind ourselves that we are not people who have to live under the power—or rather the bondage—of Satan and all the labels we've been given in our world. No, we are labeled as God's daughters and sons. We are marked with his sign, which is a reminder that the Holy Spirit lives in us. We are not helpless, hopeless, weak or unimportant. We belong to God. We have his power in us. We have his agenda before us.

We do not belong to someone or to this world. We belong to God. And no matter what you go through, no matter where you go wrong, no matter what label anyone else puts on you, remember that in your baptism God says, "I love you. And I've labeled you, 'My dearly loved child of the covenant.'" Now live out of that comforting identity.