

## **1EpiphanyB11 Mark 1:4-11**

There's a wonderful blooper from a church bulletin that goes: "This afternoon, there will be baptisms of infants at the north and south sides of the sanctuary. Children will be baptized at both ends!" As we continue the Epiphany journey this morning, Mark begins his gospel with the story of Jesus' life with his baptism.

The stage has long been set, and John has spent his whole life and ministry getting ready for this day. "If you will listen to me and change your ways, God will grant you a new life. Listen! A new person is coming, someone who is greater than me. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

When he comes, things will be different. In the meantime, get ready. Prepare your hearts; prepare your lives. Turn around and be saved." As we know, people came in droves to hear the message, to be baptized, and to become John's disciples. To them, John the Baptist was the closest thing to a Messiah they had.

In Judaism, baptism was a ritual washing of something, whether it was a person or a set of dishes. The idea was simple, but power packed. It was the only way to be purified of any uncleanness. John was calling people to a ritual cleansing that symbolized the cleansing that the Messiah would work in them. That's why John kept saying that he could only baptize them with water, but the one who comes after him, will do more. The Messiah wouldn't use water, but God's Spirit to make them clean.

No wonder Mark skips all the stuff in the nativity. He has a more meaningful way to tell us who Jesus is and why his life is going to be such a big deal. During the baptism of Jesus, God speaks from seemingly out of nowhere. "This is my Son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased." Mark's account indicates that this was a real event with a divine voice that anybody around the immediate vicinity should have been able to hear. But there isn't a stampede either to get closer or to get away from the river.

Was Mark describing something that happened but only Jesus heard and felt it? If that was the case, then how did Mark know about it? Maybe it was a solitary, private moment that Jesus alone experienced and shared with others later on. Then, this story would have been passed down as part of the oral tradition and it would have come to Mark's attention. That's how the folks who write the commentaries explain it. All we know is that life didn't change for most of the people there that day and John continued his own ministry, and died a pretty horrible death.

But Jesus heard it, and for him, it was profound enough to propel him into a public ministry of his own.

No matter who you are, baptism is a profound business. And regardless of how or when it's done, the symbol, the sign of God's claim on you is truly a watershed event (no pun intended) in a person's life. At its root, baptism is our personal response, or a parent's response on a child's behalf, to the God who offers us a new way of living and being in the world by recognizing that we are embraced and empowered by the unconditional love of the God who created us. It's a sacred moment, an outward sign of an inward and spiritual grace. It is our entry into the universal church, which is why all medieval churches and Catholic churches to this day have the baptismal font at the back of the sanctuary near the door, symbolizing entry. And why many Protestant churches have the font, or the baptistery at the front of the sanctuary, so that as you look forward during the service, your eye will catch a glimpse of them and be reminded of your own baptism.

"Sarah Jo Sarchet is a Presbyterian pastor in Chicago, and she shares this story online. A 10 year-old boy in her congregation named Cameron, walked into her office one day and said he needed to talk to her. "I'd like to be baptized," he said. "We were learning about Jesus' baptism in Sunday School. The teacher asked the class who was baptized, and all the other kids raised their hands. I want to be baptized, too."

"Using her best pastoral care tone of voice, Sarah Jo asked, "Cameron, do you really want to be baptized because everyone else is?" Cameron wrinkled up his face and said, "No. I want to be baptized because it means I belong to God."

Sarah Jo was impressed by his understanding. "Well, then, how about this Sunday?" Cameron's smile dropped. "Do I have to be baptized in front of all those people in the church? Can't I just have a friend baptize me in the river?" "Where did you come up with that idea?" "Well, Jesus was baptized by his cousin John in a river, wasn't he?" "You have a point. But, if a friend baptized you in the river, how would the church recognize it?"

And Cameron answered with anything but a child's response. "I guess by my new way of living." (1)

Baptism, then, is a cleansing, a naming, and the beginning place of a lifetime full of relationship with God and with each other. We're all included with Christ and with each other.

We are here today to reaffirm that Christ has an unmistakable and unique claim on us and we're in it together. We are God's people, touched by the Spirit to: think more clearly, feel more deeply, speak more truthfully,

love more extravagantly, serve more creatively, give more wholeheartedly, and live more fully.

As the new church year begins, the good stuff is going to get better as we continue to listen and discern where it is that God wants us to serve as individuals and as a community of faith.

Regardless of what comes next, know this. The God who created you and knows your name, will be with you in all things. And so will we. So keep your eyes and ears open. Because God will come to remind you whose you are. And in the stillness of your heart, where only you can hear, God's voice will speak the love of new life to you...you are my son...you are my daughter. And in you...I am well pleased.

Can you think of a better way to start 2012?

Amen

*(1) "A New Way of Living," Rev. Sarah Jo Sarchet, preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago; [www.esermons.com](http://www.esermons.com), 1/7/2009.*