

*"God Calling: You Are My Beloved"*

*Part I in the series, God Calling*

*Mark 1:4-11*

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*Baptism of the Lord; January 8, 2012*

If it were all up to Mark, we'd have baptism pageants. It's Luke we can thank for our Christmas plays with flocks of wooly three-year-olds and a dolly in the manger. Matthew gives us middle school wise men with painted-on beards and chipped gold gift boxes. John offers little in the way of pageants, but no Christmas is complete without his prologue, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

But if Mark had his way, we'd hold baptism pageants. There's no Christmas to speak of Mark. He starts things off with Jesus meeting John the Baptizer out at the Jordan. So why shouldn't we gather at the banks of the Chagrin River and celebrate Jesus' baptism?

In the church's liturgical time Baptism of the Lord Sunday typically falls the second Sunday in January, which seems as good a time as any in Northeast Ohio for outdoor, full immersion baptism. There would be parts for everyone! We could be those crowds from all over Judea and Jerusalem that John attracted to the Jordan. We'd all gather at the Chagrin and play the part of people seeking new life, confessing their sins. We'd take a bracing dip in the water and gasp at new life with God! So what do you think? Shall we skip Christmas play this year and head to the Chagrin next January 13?

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The star the pageant would be John, of course, that camel's-hair-wearing, locust-eating, wild man of a prophet. I'm thinking 5<sup>th</sup> grade boy for this role, someone who'd think it cool to munch bugs. One day, out in Judea's wilds, someone showed up whom John had been talking up for some time. His coming had been a frequent riff in the baptizer's preaching: "Someone more powerful than I is coming; I'm not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals," John would preach to the crowds. One day, there he was.

Now, depending on who you ask, whether Matthew, Mark, Luke or John, you'll get a different take on what happened when Jesus showed up to be baptized. According to Matthew, John protested. He said, "I'll have none of this baptizing you, Jesus. You're the one who should baptize me." In the Gospel of John the Baptizer points, and says, "Look! There's the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!" But in Mark and Luke, John the Baptist gets quiet when Jesus shows up. From the second and third evangelists we get the impression John didn't make a to do when Jesus arrived on the scene. Perhaps in our baptism pageant we won't specify who is playing the role of Jesus. In the telling of Mark, Jesus apparently went under and came up no different from anyone else. No pomp or fanfare, just another Judean receiving baptism from John.

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The church has always been a little uncomfortable with Jesus getting baptized. There's something about it that doesn't seem right, Jesus getting lumped together with these people confessing sins and receiving forgiveness. It seems like, of all people, Jesus is the one who *shouldn't* receive baptism. He was the one who was like us in every way, except without sin, as the Letter to the Hebrews says. What was he doing at the Jordan, in same water that washed away the transgressions of his peers?

Perhaps the placement of the baptism in Mark's gospel can help us with this. Mark's opening chapter is about beginnings. "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" Mark says in his very first line. Baptism tells the good news that a new life has begun. No one seeks baptism that wants to keep living the same old way. Baptism says, God is giving a fresh start. We're washed of the old life so we might live something new. Jesus didn't need the cleansing, but he was starting something new.

Jesus' baptism was the first act of his public ministry. He was stepping out of anonymous, small town Nazareth life and would soon proclaim, "The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" He was following God's call and going under by John was his first public was first public way of living it.

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Today the church marks people for living gospel ministry. The Session will lay on hands, ordaining and installing deacons and elders to Jesus-resonant ministry. Our deacons will lead us in showing compassion and serving the needy; our elders will discern God's will and lead the church to embody God's kingdom in these parts. We will call people by name--Joy, Sue, Marsha, Sam, Chuck, Shelley, Nancy, Barb. We'll do this right up in front of everyone, saying God's Spirit is upon these to lead this church in the way of Jesus.

It'll actually be more a ceremonious start to ministry than what Jesus had. Out at the Jordan no one hailed him as leader. No high priest laid hands on him. He didn't get certificate like what Joy and Sue will receive upon their ordination: On this day, 30 A.D., you were declared Son of God. Signed, John the Baptist and Clerk of Session.

As public as the baptism was, according to Mark's witness there was privacy about it. There was Jesus, emerging from the water, his ears still clearing, his eyes still blurry, his hair gritty with Jordan silt. He looked up to see the heavens tear heavens tear like cheesecloth being ripped from the middle out. The Holy Spirit split the gap and sailed like a dove right to where Jesus was. *Jesus* saw this, says Mark. Not John, not the crowds, but *Jesus* who saw the heavens tear and the Holy Spirit descend.

There's a long strain of thought in the church that says Jesus was baptized *for us* to lead us into our baptism--to demonstrate he was one with all of us sinners. While I'd say yes and amen to this way of thinking, I still wonder if the baptism meant more. I mean, to Jesus. I mean, that baptism moment was grace *for him* as he prepared to embark on a ministry that would demand his entire life.

Ministry in Jesus' name is demanding--Hey, Session, can I get an Amen? Well, what about ministry not just in Jesus' name, but as Jesus himself? What did Jesus need to live faithful to God in his call? If he was Presbyterian maybe we'd train him in the *Book of Order* and *Book of Confessions* but it seems like that wouldn't have been enough for being gospel in the flesh. Maybe he could sign up for a seminar on "Kingdom Leadership." Whatever ministry preparation Jesus had, Mark doesn't tell us.

Or maybe the baptism was it? Do you think that Jesus was baptized because to live the life he would live, revealing the life of God, there was a preparatory word he needed to hear? A word to wash him over and saturate his soul?

Jesus was rising from the water when a voice, an unmistakable voice, a voice that was near to his heart said, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." The voice spoke directly to Jesus. It was the same voice that, ages back, soared 'cross the face of the deep and said, "Let there be light." When this voice speaks a new thing begins.

"You are my Son, whom I love." It's a voice heard by those in ministries called "deacon," "elder," Sunday School teacher; parent, employee, business owner, food cupboard volunteer. "You are my child, whom I love"--a dignifying voice, one that speaks over the likes of the thirty some men at Cleveland City Mission last Wednesday night.

Do you think believing this voice and this word -- "You're my Son. I love you. In you I thrill with happiness!" -- was most of what Jesus needed for his life of ministry? And maybe not just for ministry but also just for the wellbeing of his soul? Do you think this word of God's gladness in Jesus was the word that most sustained him across his life?

God didn't say it after Jesus had cast his first demon out. God's pronouncement of love upon Jesus came before he had preached a bang-up sermon. God declared his pleasure in Jesus before Jesus had healed, or stood up to opponents, or took faithfulness all the way to the cross. Before

Jesus had done anything to demonstrate faithfulness to God, God said, "I love you. I just do. You're my Son. I couldn't be more pleased."

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Today, we ordain and install people responding to a call spoken by the voice of God. We have the font out to remind us that their ministry--really, all our ministries--flow from baptism's water. Whether it was sprinkling or dunking, whether at font, ocean or river, it wasn't just water that washed over us. There was a sky-ripping word from God that overtook our lives. God didn't say it because God had seen our lives and thought we were up to snuff. If we were baptized infants God said it before we'd had a chance to fail or succeed. If we were of professing age, God said it regardless of the degree of faithfulness we'd show. At our baptism God looked at each of us and said, "You are my child, and I love you. I just do. I couldn't be more thrilled that you are you."

It's like a parent cracking a child's door at night and looking at a son or daughter asleep and saying, "I love you. I simply do," not thinking at all about the child's mess-ups that day or what she had accomplished lately in life, but just looking at this being. This one-of-a-kind creation of God and feeling a soul-stirring thrill simply that the child is.

"God loves you, God loves me" can almost seem trite, yet it is a word that tears and mends the fabric of creation. And, one day at the River Jordan, this plainspoken word of God's love and pleasure in him struck Jesus so deep he carried it all the way to the cross.

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I got a phone call last week. "Hi, I'm calling about the Willy Wonka play at Lindsey Elementary." I knew what was coming next. I'd signed up to monitor squirrely girls and boys at play practice and performance. The call was to keep me honest to what I said I'd do.

God gives calls such as these. Do justice, love kindness, give to the poor, you will be my witness. Serve as elder, as deacon. But there is one call that God makes more than any other. It's God's first call to us, and one God surely places more often than we pick up.

It's God calling to say, "I love you. I just do. I thrill to think about you. You are such source of happiness to me." With Jesus' baptism as our witness, as often as we receive this call, just listening to God's pleasure pronounced upon us, we have much, maybe all we need to live and serve in Jesus' name.

A voice and a Savior have torn through heaven to say and to show, "I love you." Is this not the best news there is? And doesn't it make you want to live for this God? Amen.