

Baptism of Our Lord B, 2009

Text: Mark 1:4-11

Title: Back to the Beginning

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This week it's back to the beginning. Christmas is past. Vacation is over. It's time to take it once more from the top: Mark chapter 1.

All the gospels begin in different ways.

Matthew begins with a genealogy. He wants you to know that Jesus is the son of Abraham and the son of David. He tells of the coming of the Magi, the death of the innocents, and the Flight to Egypt. And then Jesus' baptism.

Luke begins with Mary and the Angel, with Bethlehem and the shepherds, even including last week's story of Jesus as a teenager. And then Jesus' baptism.

John begins in the beginning, with the Word who made all things, the Word made flesh who dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. And then Jesus' baptism.

Mark begins very simply. "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." That's Mark 1:1. And then it's on to John and the Jordan River and Jesus' baptism. Mark doesn't waste any time. The Christmas stories are nice, but Mark wants to take you to where the action is, the meat, the heart of the story.

No matter how they start, all four gospel writers include Jesus' baptism at the beginning. Jesus' baptism is the starting point.

Mark tells us that John came baptizing, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. We heard this message back in Advent, when John came to prepare us for Jesus' coming. "Repent" "Prepare the way of the Lord." Get the road ready.

John got people's attention. John was hard to ignore. Mark tells us that the whole region of Judah, and all the people of Jerusalem came to him and were baptized, confessing their sins.

John's baptism was for sinners. People who were liars, and cheaters, and thieves. John's baptism was for those who had made a mess of their lives and needed a new beginning. In short, John's baptism was for everyone.

We know we're sinners, too. We know that we need to be baptized. We know that we're born sinful and unclean, that we've continued to sin against God and need His forgiveness. We know that we need a new start, a new beginning.

The opening lines of Mark's gospel make sense. John calls people to repent, people repent and are baptized. Everything fits. But then the story changes. Something happens that doesn't make sense at all. Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan River. Jesus acts just like everyone else. Jesus acts just like a common sinner.

Why does Jesus come to be baptized? When Matthew tells the story, Matthew tells us that John objects. John doesn't want to baptize Jesus. John says, "Shouldn't this be the other way around? You've got it backwards, Jesus. You need to baptize me."

Why does the perfect Son of God need to be baptized? Surely He hasn't committed any sins, has He? Jesus does not have any sins of His own. He was born free from sin and lived a perfect life. No, Jesus does not have any sins of His own, but He has all of yours, and mine, too.

Jesus becomes like you in His baptism. He becomes a sinner, just like you. He enters the dirty, muddy waters of the Jordan River, a river polluted by the sins of all who have been baptized there. And He takes all of this sinfulness, all that dirtiness, all of that pollution onto Himself.

Jesus comes to the Jordan River as a sinner, just like you. He bears all of your sin from his baptism to his death on Calvary.

After Jesus' Baptism, the gospels each take us on a different route through the ministry of Jesus. Matthew starts with Jesus the preacher, sitting with His disciples on the Mount and preaching to them. Mark moves quickly to Jesus' calling His disciples, casting out demons, and healing the sick. Luke has Jesus teaching in the synagogues, and preaching good news to the poor. John gives us Jesus at the wedding of Cana, turning water into wine.

But the road in all four gospels leads to one place – Calvary. Jesus bore the sin of the world, and that meant one thing- death. The wages of sin is death, and Jesus goes to the Jordan, and then from the Jordan to Calvary for you.

This is what makes Jesus God's beloved Son- not that He preached and taught, not that He healed and did miracles, not that He was a nice guy, what makes Jesus God's beloved Son is that He dies on your behalf.

In your baptism you, then, are joined to Jesus in this death and resurrection. Paul explains this beautifully in Romans 6. "Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection."

When Jesus came to the Jordan River, He joined Himself with you in your sinfulness. He became like you that you might become like Him. In your baptism, all of this is delivered to you. In your baptism you have died with Christ. You were baptized into His death. Your sins died with Jesus on the cross, and in the waters of Holy Baptism this great exchange is made. He takes your death from you, and He dies in your place. You receive His life from Him.

From Jesus' perspective, it's the worst trade ever. He loses everything, including His own life, and you gain everything. It's not fair. But that's a good thing.

Jesus loves you so much, He goes to the Jordan River for you. He takes your place. Because you have been joined with Jesus in His baptism, everything that is true for Jesus is true for you.

At Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit descended on Him. At your baptism, the Holy Spirit descended on you as well, carried along by the Words of the pastor, "I baptize you in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

At Jesus' baptism the voice of the Father declared, "This is my beloved Son." At your baptism your heavenly Father claims you as His own child. You become a member of the family, and your Father loves you.

At Jesus' baptism, the Father said, "With Him I am well-pleased." At your baptism the Father is pleased with you, because you have now been joined with Jesus.

We look to our parents for approval. As much as we rebel and seek our independence, it is important to us that our parents are pleased with us. We want them to be proud of us.

You can know for sure that your heavenly Father is pleased with you. There's nothing you could have done to earn His love, but it is freely given to you in Holy Baptism. The Father now looks down on you with love. There are few faces happier than that of a proud parent. "That's my boy!" You scream as your son crosses the goal line. "That's my girl." You tell all the parents at the concert. Imagine the way you felt when your child graduated from high school or college. "That's my boy," says the Father to Jesus, and He says the same to you.

As Paul says, we are not only joined with Jesus in His death, but also in His new life. We were joined with Jesus in His resurrection. Just as Jesus was raised from the dead on the third day, so you, too, were raised to live a new life.

The new life doesn't start at some future day years from now. You don't have to wait until you die to experience it. Remember- you've already died. And you've already been given new life. Your baptism is a new creation.

That brings us all the way back to our Old Testament lesson. There's a reason why these verses from Genesis were read just moments ago. The first creation began with darkness and chaos. But God was there. His Spirit was hovering over the waters. And God spoke, and brought life and light and all things into existence by His word.

In baptism, you are made a new creation. His Spirit hovers over the waters of this font as well. When He speaks, "I baptize you," you are made a new creation. You have a new beginning.

We are now barely two weeks into the New Year. How's it going thus far? Did you make any resolutions? Have you kept them?

For many of us the New Year isn't going much better than the old one. Within the first week of the New Year, three of our members were taken to the hospital. Within the last week we've also had three families contact the church in need of food. The latest unemployment numbers are out, and few people are optimistic.

But our problems run much deeper than our failing health and our failing economy. All of our efforts to live our lives in accordance with God's Words ultimately fall short. We fall back into the same sins that we keep committing.

Have you ever wanted to just start over? Do you want to declare a "re-do" and try 2009 over again?

In Jesus you have a new beginning. You were joined with Jesus in your baptism, and this is true for you every day.