

Baptism of Jesus: Mark 1

Jesus was at a turning point in his life....

Of his life before this we know very little. Nothing in fact, according to Mark. Mark's gospel was the first written of the four that are in our Bible, and he doesn't include anything about the birth, or childhood of Jesus. He begins with Jesus as a full grown man, about to be baptized by John.

So. Here he is, fully grown, about to make a decision that will change his life forever.

I'm not sure how you feel, but I believe that like the rest of us, he had to struggle with what his life meant and what decisions he would make with who he knew himself to be.

I don't think he was a puppet, simply living out a plan that was all set for him – do you?

I think he had a choice to make, right there at the Jordan (and all along after that too) and he made it. A choice about the meaning of his life, about what's most important, he had to decide.

How has it been for you that way? Do you remember a time when you had an important decision to make? How did you do it?

Maybe you're at that place now – what sort of things do you do, or think about, or weigh, to help you?

Jesus' own baptism takes place in the wilderness. That's interesting in itself...the wilderness.

And he's baptized by a wild, crazy radical prophet, John.

John had started a movement that called for change. LOUDLY. Kind of "occupy the Jordan" - John and his followers believed that this world needed to change. REAL change, down to the roots change.

Little tucks and touch-ups here and there just would not cut it he said. God wants deep down transformation and God wants it NOW. That was his message.

Those who came to John were looking for just that. A new way to live. They responded down to the core of their beings to John's message. John said a new thing – a new way - is coming. You want in?? Then show us. Get down here in the water as a sign that you do. No sitting on the sidelines. No cheering from the shore. No just thinking it's a good idea. Get down in the water and show us you mean it.

And they did. People flocked to the wilderness, thirsty inside for a better world, thirsty for a better way, a better life for themselves and their people.

They went to the wilderness to hear John, and he spoke to their longing. There, in the desert, in the wilderness, with no distractions, things get REAL focused. It's a place of radical cutting away of the stuff that clutters our minds and hearts. In the wilderness there's nothing. Sand, some water, more sand....that's it.

The fact that it's in the wilderness would speak loudly to the people of his day in two ways:

- 1) The wilderness is where all the good stuff happens! God's people spent most of their time in the wilderness. After the Exodus...they wandered for years. It was there they learned to trust God, who led with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Who fed them with manna and quails and gave them water from a rock. In the wilderness they received the law....the wilderness is a very familiar place – it speaks of freedom from captivity, and it speaks of trust.
- 2) More practically, they were living at a time when all the religious duties that had to be done; the sacrifices, the ritual washing that made a person clean according to the law...all that happened in the temple. Those who were too poor to get to Jerusalem, who had jobs that kept them from regular worship were mostly out of luck, unable to fully participate in the religious life of the people. That's one of the reasons it's so cool that the shepherds were the first to hear the news of Jesus' birth (although I'm now in the wrong gospel) - they were unclean and unable to worship regularly – it's pretty powerful to hear that they are the first to know the news....

So here, what John is offering is a religious ritual that ANYONE can take part in. The poor, the marginalized....everybody can go there. Anybody can enter the waters. It's politically and religiously dynamite here. He's doing a kind of "in your face" to the religious elite and offering a leveling religious experience. AND.....it's right at the edge of the Jordan, the very river the people crossed when they entered the Promised land centuries ago. We're about to occupy this land in a new way, he seems to be saying. This location is DRIPPING WITH scriptural import and political meaning.

A decision hangs in the air. Like droplets of water, glistening – inviting. What will you decide he says? To them, and to us.

From the lips of the prophet – a challenge. An invitation. You feel it rippling through your being like the water he's stirring up as he preaches.

It's time for a change, he says. God is about to do a new thing, transform the world and turn it inside out. And God needs you to be part of that. Will you come?

The waters are calling you as surely as they called Jesus. It's about what kind of person you want to be. It's about what kind of church we want to be. What kind of world we want to live in. The waters are still calling – waters of freedom and equality and new beginnings ...

Waters that will wash away old ways of thinking and behaving, and flood you with the very power of God that brooded over the waters when the world began.

The world as then needs to be made new. Jesus answered the call, entered the water and said YES to God's way in his life and in the world. The words he hears at that moment are for you too: You are my beloved child; I delight in you.

That voice is for you; know that the voice of God is there and will sustain you in all your decisions; when the going is tough and the way ahead is unclear; when the vision is blurred

The water, the voice, is there to make all things new.