



Lexington Presbyterian Church

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Pilgrim

Mark 1:4-11

A sermon by William M. Klein

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Our lesson for this morning is from among the first words about Jesus that Mark, the Gospel writer, gives us. Before I read the lesson I want to say a few things that may help us listen with different ears.

According to Mark, Jesus' story begins with a messenger...with a man who serves as a voice meant to prepare the way of the Lord. That man, that messenger, was John the baptizer.

The portrait Mark paints leaves little doubt John was an odd dude. He lived in the wilderness apart from polite society. He dressed simply and ate simply. We have the sense he had the look of a wild-man. And we also have the sense he had not just a commanding voice but a compelling voice...for people from miles around traveled into the desert to see him, to hear him, and to receive from him a baptism of repentance.

What did that mean...to receive a baptism of repentance? In our day, we tend to think it meant each Jew who came to be baptized whispered his or her individual sins into John's ear. Things like, "I said some bad words." "I told a lie." "I had an unclean thought." "I cheated my brother." That sort of thing...because that is what we tend to think confession of sin means.

But that was not at all the case...not in Jesus' day and not in our own day. At some level the Jews Mark was writing about realized John was calling them to acknowledge they had been living day after day without giving God a second thought...as if God did not exist. They may have been following the rules...saying the formula prayers, bowing and bending as they were supposed to do...but their hearts were not in it. They were not being true to their God-given constitution, which is to say, they were not granting God the central place in their hearts, minds, or actions.

The real sin John wanted them to confess was that they only thought they had been loving God with their whole heart, when, in fact, they had been loving God half-heartedly...that they were merely going through the motions. John wanted them to come to the point where they didn't want to live this way any longer.

His message lit a fire within them, at least some of them...a fire that tends to be lit inside us, too, whenever we pay attention to the Holy Spirit already at work in us and round us...when we pay attention to the God-orienting hard-drive God placed within each of us while we were in the womb.

There is one more thing I want you to understand before we read the passage aloud. Mark tells us that Jesus came to John to be baptized. Did that mean Jesus needed repentance just like everyone else? By submitting to John's baptism was Jesus saying he had been living day after day without giving God a second thought, too...and that he was hoping to do better?

I don't quite understand how it is true...but Jesus was the one human being who belonged utterly and completely to God. His entire life was an example of what it looks

like to love the Lord God with one's whose heart, mind, body, and soul...and because that was true, what it looks like to love one's neighbor as perfectly as it can be done.

Jesus chose to be baptized like everyone else as a public way of declaring God was at the heart of who he was.

So, with these two things in mind...1) what John's baptism of repentance was...and 2) why Jesus chose to be baptized...let's turn to the passage in Mark's Gospel account.

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." 9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Mk. 1:4-11 NRSV)

2

The story Mark tells is obviously about Jesus, John the baptizer, and the Jews who came from all over Judea to receive John's baptism of repentance. But it is also our story.

It is our story in as much as it serves as a "voice" preparing the way of the Lord for us...as a "voice" that invites us to be drawn to the waters and into the ways our lives are changed by these waters. We might also use an image other than water and say that through this story we are drawn to a fire...for that is exactly what the people from across Judea felt when they were in John's presence...fire. When they were near John, when they heard his words, they felt as though they had been drawn near to a kind of fire. You and I would say they were experiencing the zeal, the fervor, the enthusiasm, the fire of the Holy Spirit.

When we pay attention to the Holy Spirit at work all around us and in us...we too, as John Calvin put it 500 years ago, are liable to find ourselves "strangely warmed." Our hearts may well catch fire. Our wildest dreams may burst into flame. Our faces may glow from being so close to the fire. The fact is we can't help catching fire when we realize we are in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

That is why Mark's story is also our story. We wade in the waters of baptism and emerge on fire. Who we were before is certainly a part of who we are...but an encounter with the Holy Spirit changes us and sets us on a new path.

Baptism marked a turning point in Jesus' life. From that moment he turned his face toward Jerusalem.

Often people think of baptism or Confirmation as an **end point**. For them it marks the destination, the conclusion of the faith journey. The work of faith development is completed. For Jesus, though, baptism marked a starting point. It set him on a new path.

We will never know whether or not Jesus knew the shape that path would take. That would be pure speculation. It seems that it was enough for him to be on the new

path. Alive to God's Spirit, he moved from this to that, day after day...eyes, ears, imagination ever at attention, eager for what the Holy Spirit would reveal next.

3

Mark's story is our story. It is our story as through it we hear the voice of God's Spirit wooing us...coaxing us...imploring us to entrust ourselves to Jesus who journeys with us. It is our story as we allow God's Spirit to set our hearts on fire with love for God and for our neighbor. It is our story as it awakens in us a passion to learn what our lives can be when we give God our first and best thoughts rather than our second thoughts, our after-thoughts. Jesus' story is our story when it leads us to say we want to be done with living half-heartedly...that, instead, we want to be consumed by a burning desire to love and serve God.

As we begin a new year, may we throw caution to the wind and ask God's Spirit to set us on fire so we may be drawn into that ultimate mystery where the window to the eternal opens...where bread and wine are transformed into the bread of life and cup of salvation.

Just as Jesus' life was changed through his baptism, so did and so do we take on changed form. And like the risen Christ, we re-enter the world as changed people...singing the song of the Easter dawn. The song we sing as we journey wide-eyed from day to day through the best of times and the worst of times...our pilgrim song, is this: Alleluia.¹



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Endnotes:

¹ Cherwien, Susan Palo. 2009. From Glory Into Glory. St. Louis, MO: Morning Star, 59.