

We Trust Our Belovedness

Sermon 210 | Greystone Baptist Church | January 14, 2024

Mark 1:1-11

Five years and one day ago, I stood behind this pulpit for the first time as your Senior Pastor. The sermon that day was called, "A Church of the Broken Beloved," and it is saved in my files as GBC Sermon #1. A colleague of mine strongly encouraged me to number the sermons as a way of remembering the journey - and all the work - that goes into this sacred and peculiar task of preparing and preaching each week.

Today's sermon has a similar title, but will go into the files as sermon #210. Which means that if we were to sum up the amount of time we have spent together in the preaching moment these last 5 years it would amount to 210 sermons, approximately 441,000 words, and nearly 4,200 minutes.

I think it is pretty remarkable that you all have listened to all of those words and made it through all of those minutes without ever nodding off to sleep or letting your mind wander...

More seriously though, I believe it is important to recognize the anniversaries of significant moments and experiences in our lives and to celebrate them together. In five years we have weathered significant storms. We have said goodbye to friends who have moved away, we've grieved the loss of so many loved ones, we have welcomed new members, we survived a global pandemic and learned how to worship at home when we could not gather, we have created an online community where people can worship, study the Bible, engage in studies, and participate in meetings even when they cannot make it to the church building. We have embraced difficult conversations with courage and humility knowing that avoidance is no longer an option. And this is not an exhaustive list, rather it is just a start... a prompt to get us thinking, remembering what has been possible because of God's presence with us in every moment.

Yes, it is good to give ourselves a minute to recognize where we have been, what we have done, and who we are becoming - together - with God.

One of my favorite things about this particular anniversary - the one we share together at the beginning of each new year - is that it often falls on what our Christian tradition calls *Baptism of our Lord Sunday* - which means it is the day we remember the stories of Jesus' baptism and consider their meaning for our lives. There are three baptism stories in the New Testament as Matthew, Mark, and Luke each add their own flair to the story. Today we are going with Mark's version and conveniently, this is exactly the part of Jesus' story where Mark decides to begin his Gospel. For Mark, it all starts here.

Beginnings are important, you see, because while we may like to gloss over them in our rush to the action of the narrative, the beginnings tell us something of where the author is going.

Matthew begins with a Jewish genealogy, letting us know that the family and cultural context of Jesus' line matter. Jesus is a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Tamar, and Ruth. He is the child of the Israelite kings David, Solomon, and Uzziah. He will share a lineage with the prophet Amos. All of this is important to include in the story because Jesus will be the perfect combination of them all, the culmination of God's work in and through the people of Israel.

Luke takes another approach, establishing himself as a Hellenistic historiographer, prefacing his account by naming his benefactor and his purpose¹ which is to write an “orderly account so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.” (Lk. 1:4)

Mark - ever the minimalist - states his objective without all that fanfare and explanation: *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* (that’s it!?) Then he quotes Isaiah and whisks us (the reader) away to the very edge of the civilized world - the wilderness - where the messenger, John, is baptizing.

It is there on the margin, that it all begins for Mark. There, outside of the social order, independent of the religious establishment, far beyond the scope of the political powers that reign... there... just beyond the reach of any societal claims, in the waters of wilderness, that the good news of Jesus Christ begins.

This is not the first time God’s innovation happens in the wild. Remember the first words of the Hebrew Bible (which we call the Old Testament) which say: “In the beginning, God created...” The Greek word here - *archē* - echoes the dawn of all creation. The moment when God took chaos, wilderness, disorder, and transformed it into beauty, goodness, and blessing.

(I wonder if a similar transformation is happening here? Is Mark trying to say that the beginning of the Gospel IS the dawning of a new reality, a new world order, one that is inseparable from the person, Jesus Christ?)

With our minds still full of wonder, Jesus enters the story for the first time. We may still be trying to understand what God is doing here in the beginning of this *good news* but Mark is moving along at a rapid pace. Here comes Jesus, and his arrival is not announced by an impressive list of relatives (as in Matthew), it is not the culmination of a long, miraculous birth narrative (as in Luke), but here, Jesus enters the story in a nonchalant and regular way on the heels of a crowd that came to be baptized.

*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee
to be baptized by John in the Jordan.*

That’s all we get.

...But when Jesus emerges from the water something miraculous happens, he receives a vision of the heavens opening, the Spirit descending, and a voice that says “You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.” (v.10-11). From there, Jesus exits the scene as quickly as he entered.

Even though this story is relatively short and offers only a few details, it has captivated the theological imagination and firmly cemented the practice of baptism into every denomination and ritual tradition of our faith. We may not agree on how and when baptism should happen, but we all agree that it *should*.

Even though the story is short and Jesus’ presence in it is captured by just a few sentences, this story is where it all begins for Mark, the good news, the gospel, it all starts here. And it seems that - at least if our tradition has anything to say about it - Mark was onto something.

¹ Ched Myers in *Binding the Strong Man*, 92

From the earliest days of the Jesus movement, baptism was a critical point of entry. The baptism Jesus sought out was the one offered by John, the prophet, who called the people to repent of their sins. Isn't it interesting that Jesus wanted *this* baptism in the first place? Maybe Mark is giving us another clue?

In the first century, Paul frequently quoted baptismal liturgies when he wrote letters to the churches, giving us a window into the past, offering a clue that baptism mattered in the earliest churches. Paul regularly reminds the people to return to their baptisms as a reminder of their covenant with God, and a reminder of how they will go about their mission together:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves in Christ. There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:27-28)

In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all! (Colossians 3:11)

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:12-13)

These words are a powerful reminder of the covenant that came with the water. When the people entered the waters of baptism, they were transformed by the Spirit of God. In that baptismal transformation all the markings of the most contentious issues of the day, those worldly labels of Greek, Jew, slave, free, male, female... all of that went away... These earthly classifications of race, class, and gender no longer bore their power because all of that was traded in for the new name and a new identity: Beloved.

Though many years have passed, the baptismal covenant remains unchanged. When we enter the waters of baptism, we are transformed by the Spirit of God. That baptismal transformation means that our own worldly markers of race, class, and gender no longer hold their power, because in baptism we trade all of that for a new name and a new identity: Beloved.

This can be an empowering experience for those who tend to find themselves on the margins, where the baptismal waters await. There are so many for whom those same tired categories of race, class, and gender have been used as tools for oppression, exclusion, and judgment. The opportunity to release those in exchange for belonging, for a name like Beloved, is a gift of grace and it is an experience of liberation.

But there are also those for whom the release of such titles can feel like a demotion of sorts. Those of us who are privileged to find ourselves advantaged by race, class, gender, or some combination thereof... we enter into the baptismal waters with a little hesitation, you might say, because we know that when we relinquish these worldly gifts and their power in our lives, we will have to give up the pieces of ourselves that have served us well, helped us advance, enabled some of our success, and ensured that we remained safely in the center of our society, rather than out there on the margins.

Baptism is promising, but it comes with a cost (which is why we must remember).

To wrap things up and underscore the point, I want to share an old story that preachers love to use. Maybe you're familiar with it?

A man who was about to be baptized by immersion was on his way into the pool when he realized that in his back pocket was his wallet. He stopped and was about to remove it when the preacher said, "Stop! Either I baptize you and your wallet, or I do not baptize you at all!"

Now the preacher was not interested in the water physically washing the man's money, and credit cards, and identification which were all in that wallet. The preacher was not concerned to make sure the fine leather would be ruined. No, the preacher was making the point to say: *If you're serious about following Jesus, you've got to follow all the way, with everything you have, and with all that you are.*

The truth is whether it is our wallets or our privilege, our comfortable positions or our comfort with the status quo (at home, at work, in our communities, or even here at church), following Jesus anywhere, *especially* into the waters of baptism, always requires us to change, *always* requires us to give something up, *always* requires a re-alignment of our priorities and allegiances. Because baptism is always about repentance, turning around, leaving behind the pieces of ourselves that wed us to the world when we say we are wed to Christ.

For this reason (and I may be treading on thin ice here) I think sometimes it is a shame we are only baptized once. Because I don't know about you, but I could use a reminder sometimes that when I entered those waters 32 years ago, I brought everything with me. Nobody offered to take my wallet and set it aside, Nobody offered to hold onto my pride and my ambition and my ego so that they wouldn't get splashed in the water. Nobody offered to take certain relationships and keep them protected from the baptismal pool. Nobody offered to hold my insecurities, my fears, and my disbelief so that I could pick it all back up when I emerged from the water. NO, all of that was dunked, drenched, and drained out through the pipes of that baptismal font when I said "Jesus Christ is Lord." And then I was given a new name: Beloved. Sometimes I need a reminder because I forget these things and I go looking for all that stuff I said goodbye to years ago.

Surely I'm not the only one... Maybe you struggle with that too... maybe you also need a reminder? If so... here is some good news.

Today is Baptism of our Lord Sunday. It is a liturgical day that rolls around each year about this time. And I believe the reason is, as we all embark on some new beginnings in this new year of 2024, we would do well to remember our new names, and what we let go of in order to receive them. We are Beloved. Not because of anything we did, but because of everything God does - in the center, on the margins, in the waters, and everywhere in between.

So perhaps as we stand on the brink of another anniversary, as we begin to dream together and wonder about what this next year might hold, perhaps we could start where the good news begins, and root ourselves in the cost and the promise of the water.

Amen.