

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
The Rev. Robert M. Alexander
Mark 1:4-11
“Beloved”
Baptism of the Lord Sunday
January 11, 2015

One of the movies that is in theaters right now is the Hollywood adaptation of the Broadway Musical “Into the Woods.” The story brings together many fairytales like Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, Rapunzel, Jack and the Bean Stalk and others and has them interact with one another in a fun and entertaining way. It is as if all of these stories collide in the woods. The Woods represent that place of mystery and discovery and danger. In the Woods, people discover who they really are and what they are capable of. I couldn’t help but think of The Woods as I considered the story from Mark this morning. Although in Mark we don’t find Woods, but rather, a Wilderness, a place that could be just as wild and foreboding.

Jesus embarked on a great journey – and in some ways it was a journey of discovery – discovery for the Messiah and for the people of God who were learning about who God is and how God wants us to live. Much like the Israelites, Jesus went through the waters into the wilderness – leading us all into the promised land.

For centuries people in the church have argued about the meaning and the importance of baptism. When should a person be baptized and how much water should be used? Some immerse, some dunk, some pour, and some sprinkle. The amount of water really isn’t important. I heard that one summer during a terrible drought – the Baptists started sprinkling, the Methodists used a damp rag, and the Presbyterians gave out rain checks.

In all seriousness – what matters at baptism is that we remember that we belong to God and that shapes our lives in a particular way. I don’t even remember my baptism but I know that when I come to water I remember that I am a child of God and that I too have been given the gift of an intimate relationship with the Lord of all creation by the power of the Holy Spirit. Because Jesus went there ahead of us, through him we become part of the Body of Christ – born of water and the Spirit.

We know that Jesus was immersed in the Jordan River. He had gone out, along with the multitudes, to listen to his cousin John preach up a storm. One day he walked down into the water too. Mark doesn’t tell us too many details but he does mention three significant things that happened.

Jesus saw the heavens torn open, the Spirit descended upon him, and a voice from heaven spoke to him.

When Jesus came up out of that water Mark tells us that he saw the heavens torn apart! This isn’t some sweet, whisper of an experience. This is a jolt! Mark’s language suggests that something very significant, cosmic, earth shattering and time shifting occurs here.

During Advent we read Isaiah 64 where the prophet declares, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” Perhaps this is an answer to that prayer. God has come to save the people, to reveal God’s constant presence and love, and to lead us on into abundant and eternal life. The word for “torn” is the same one used to describe the tearing of the temple curtain in Mark 15:38. At the death of Jesus the curtain was torn in two and that which separated the Holy of Holies from the people was removed. Nothing stood between God and God’s people.

The heavens were torn apart at Jesus baptism allowing for a new kind of experience with God. I wonder if Jesus ever returned to the Jordan River to remember that day or if he simply carried the memory of it with him.

Are there particular places where you feel close to God? Some people call them “thin places.” They are called that because it seems like the distance between earth and heaven isn’t that far. You somehow catch a glimpse of heaven, an experience of grace, a rush or a tingle up your spine.

It may sound silly, but I experience that feeling sometimes when I am having coffee with a friend because that is the place and experience I remember when my faith first became real to me. Sometime when I am singing I feel closer to God because I have had so many great spiritual moments associated with music. And sometimes I long to go hiking in the mountains because I have had wonderful intimate moments with God there. Sometimes when I am feeling far from God, recreating an experience like this can remind me of God’s love and grace.

When the heavens were torn open, Mark tells us that the Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove. Was it in the form of a dove? Was it a literal dove or a presence like a dove? What does Mark mean by telling us this? John had said that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and now that Spirit was coming upon him. The same Spirit would drive him deeper into the wilderness, would define his mission of healing, teaching, and proclamation, and would take him to the cross where he would give up that spirit by offering his last breath to God. Later at Pentecost he would pour out that same Spirit upon the church. And why? Because of who he is. And the voice from heaven proclaims his identity.

“You are my Son, the Beloved: with you I am well pleased.” From start to finish Mark wants us to know that we are hearing the story of the Son of God – the Messiah – God’s anointed. And as God’s Messiah, he is representative of God’s people. His experience is a model for us. His life is an example for us. His path becomes our path.

Hear the words of this poem written by Jean McCallum titled *The baptism of Jesus*:

Jesus, you are the one
Who rises from the water and the tomb
To offer new life to all.
 We offer our life
 As a sign of our worship.
Jesus, you are the one
Who agrees to be baptized
To be one with us.
 We offer our baptism
 As a sign of being with you.
Jesus, you are the one
For whom the heavens open
To allow the Spirit to descend.
 We offer our ready heart
 As a sign of our open life.
Jesus, you are the one
Who is the Son so well loved
That God’s delight is in you.
 We offer you our delight and joy
 As a sign of our everlasting love.ⁱ

When someone comes to be baptized they can expect to hear that they are cleansed from sin and grafted into Christ. They can expect to hear about love and grace and new life. They can expect to hear that they are part

of the Body of Christ. Sealed in the Spirit, we become heirs of God, co-heirs with Christ. Through Christ - we become the beloved of God!

But we don't always believe that. We get all kinds of other messages in our heads that crowd out that voice from heaven. There are days when we find ourselves in the midst of a crisis – when we look at the mess the world is in – when we consider the depths of human pain and suffering and we wonder how God's love can be a reality in such a place. If we are willing to ask that then we might also ask how God could possibly love us – especially if we think that God's love is conditional and is only given to us based on our actions.

Sometimes we carry around labels that have been placed on us by the world or that we have placed on ourselves – labels like worthless, failure, ugly, stupid, unlovable. We beat ourselves up and talk ourselves out of believing that we are God's beloved children. Henri Nouwen, once wrote that "Self-rejection is the worst trap. It is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the *Beloved*. Being the *Beloved* constitutes the truth of our existence."ⁱⁱ

You see – being God's Beloved is centered in who God is. We are created, redeemed, and sustained by a God of love who claims us in the waters of baptism, tears the heavens open for us, descends and makes his home with us, and then calls us God's own – God's beloved children. The word translated beloved is *agapetos* – it can also be translated "dearly loved." You hear the word agape? That's unconditional love! And our faith invites us to trust this message and to journey together in love – learning in Christ what it means to love God and neighbor. Can you imagine what the world might be like if we all truly believed that we were God's beloved?

At the water we remember that we are beloved – dearly loved by God!

Hear and trust this good news – "You are God's child. You are dearly loved. With you God is well pleased!" Can you believe that? Well then let's act like it! Let's live that out as truth in the way that we live and love and serve in the world!

One of my professors, Lamar Williamson, once wrote that Baptism matters "because we are who God says we are. The identity declared at baptism, however, is only a word until it is revealed with convincing power in the unfolding story of our life and death... and resurrection."ⁱⁱⁱ

The road of Jesus after his baptism was not an easy one – and neither is ours – but we are God's beloved and that is enough.

To God be the Glory! Amen.

ⁱ Jean McCallum, in Read Mark and Pray: Prayer Handbook 1992, ed. Graham Cook (London: Reformed Church, 1992).

ⁱⁱ Henri Nouwen, Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World. P.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lamar Williamson, Mark: Interpretation Series (WJK) p. 36