

Why was Jesus baptized? – Chase Macri

Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

While I was a student at Greenville College, my favorite classes were the ones I took taught by Dr. Scott Neumann of the History department. Neumann's teaching style is right up my alley because it combines both the auditory and visual learning methods with the simple use of chalk. Who knew, in this day and age, that chalk would be the most effective way for a kid to learn. Not only do I hear what we're discussing, but I see it on the chalkboard and on my notepad. Sometimes though, just seeing the words isn't enough. This has been a problem I have had with reading scripture. I am drawn to the patriarchs, Daniel, the gospels and Acts but I have a very hard time with anything that isn't narrative, with anything I cannot "picture" in my mind. Sometimes even the narratives themselves may not be enough. So I like to picture the authors, and the less vividly described characters to help get an idea what is happening in the text, to picture myself there and be surprised by the events and to try to empathize and internalize the feelings I find.

That being said, Mark is by far my favorite gospel. I love the way the author describes the way characters appear, their clothing, hair, smell, when they knelt before Jesus and when they lacked proper, Hebrew social graces. I love the way the author sets up where the events take place: the wilderness, Jerusalem at Bethphage and Bethany near the Mount of Olives, and the description of the elaborate columns, ornate finishings and statue of Moses hitting the rock with his staff by the Temple. I also love how much of a hurry he seems to be in and the language he uses to describe such haste. It makes me wonder "Why? Why was Mark in such a hurry?"

From the start of Mark's gospel we're thrown right into the thick of it. No prelude or genealogy or birth story. Nothing about Jesus' childhood. For Mark, everything is imminent. Everything is at critical mass. Everything is at break neck speed. I picture the author being a very intense person whom you wouldn't want to take to a shopping mall because he would probably leave you behind while you're in Old Navy trying on a pair of jeans. And it's not that he's bored with the store, he'd leave you in behind while you're browsing Sharper Image or my personal favorite, the Apple store. He needs to be off to the next thing, and he has to get there quickly. Or "immediately." Immediately is a word he says more than all of his friends: Matthew the CCM major, and Luke the Biology major, and our poetry reading Philosophy/Religion double major John. Mark doesn't have their kind of time. He doesn't have time for rumination though he is very deliberative. Nothing is thrown together by accident, he isn't muddling through, he just speaks with urgency because what he's trying to say is too important to miss and we need to feel that urgency because in life you never know what is next. This is one way to imagine him.

Another way is as Frederick Buechner imagines him in his lexicon of Biblical characters Peculiar Treasures. Maybe Mark was the young boy who came to Jesus in the garden at Gethsemane as the Roman soldiers were bringing Jesus to jail and fled in nothing but his birthday suit. Maybe he was always on the outside, on the fringe, still terrified from the night in the garden, running even as he wrote.

Or it could be that Mark is just extra observant. More observant than most. Maybe he has Input and Context and is the quiet friend in the corner who doesn't say much but could recant to you everything that was said by any of his friends any given evening over the past three years. He sees more of the small, minute details that the other gospel writers ignore or miss entirely. So it's not that he's in a hurry or his surroundings are constantly in turmoil. Everything around Mark continues at a normal pace, but he gets distracted by Jesus sleeping in the stern of the ship, with a small pillow under his head while the disciples above are fighting the battle of their lives against the crashing of the waves around them. You could picture him lingering, watching the Pharisees react to Jesus' condemnation of their establishment of the primacy of rules and regulations over that of the Hebrew people; their snickers, and stares, and plots to kill this "Messiah." Before long he's memorized their eye color, brand of sandals, and their lunch plans. Everything feels so "immediate" to Mark because he is constantly falling behind, having to sprint to catch up! You can almost picture him getting the first few words of a question to James out his mouth before turning around and seeing the group 2 or 300 yards away.

Whatever the case may be, Mark's "immediate" tone in his gospel is a good literary device that creates tension and leaves you on the edge of your seat with a sinking suspicion that something big is developing and sooner or later it's going to explode. The plot will take a twist that you didn't expect, and you will be both amazed and terrified.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves a little. Today's gospel lesson is at the beginning of Mark, not the middle with the glorious weirding out of Peter, James and John at the Transfiguration, or the fantastic ending filled with uncertainty and fear, but the beginning, where things are a little less defined and not quite as intense, where we're setting up the story, but Mark doesn't waste any time and hammers us right from the start.

Mark chapter 1 verse 4 "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." While Mark prepares us a little by mentioning a prophecy of Isaiah at the beginning of chapter 1, he throws us into the fray when all of the sudden as though Mark was caught looking the other way or something, here appears John. Seemingly without birth, from nowhere in particular is John the Baptist. In the other gospels, the authors give us some of John's back story, his "origins." In Luke's gospel, we hear all about John before even mentioning Jesus once, but to Mark it's as though he appeared out of thin air. There was a flash, and here's this crazy eyed guy, with disheveled, unwashed hair shouting about being the one foretold to make the paths straight but is completely incapable of untying sandals. As if that wasn't scary enough, Mark describes more. John is dressed in business casual with a tunic sewn with camel's hair held in place by a leather belt that's on its last loop.

Pretty soon he'll have to grab a knife if he has one, or maybe the sharpest stinger from the bees he's been eating so he can pull the belt tighter because nothing really puts meat on the bones more than bees and honey. John is beginning to look rather gaunt. His eyes have sunk in. He looks half dead already, and everyone in the crowd as well as Mark himself is probably praying to God that this "greater one" John speaks of comes quickly, because no one is sure how much longer John will be around to proclaim his coming. And maybe he could bring John a ham sandwich.

That of course isn't a very common way to imagine John. He was a zealot, and I hear they're pretty strong fellows.

Through the voice of John we can hear the voice of God as strong, powerful, wanting to separate and forgive the wheat and destroy the chaff with flames of fire or as the cedars of Lebanon that our Psalmist writes of in Psalm 29. I can see the first Mark, the Mark who is always in a hurry to do the important, imminent things that cannot wait for you to put the jeans back on the rack at Old Navy, seeing the truth in Psalm 29. God is a powerful being, holy, and set apart. Able to "make the wilderness shake with his voice" which is maybe why Mark placed John in a such a setting, and why he put words of fire and brimstone in his mouth. Maybe that's the second Mark, the Mark who fled Gethsemane naked and scared, who likes Psalm 29 and put John in the wilderness. The wilderness is often a symbol of God's judgement in scripture, so what better place to find a prophet preaching repentance and what better motivator to lead a new life pleasing to God than an utter terror of God's wrath.

John's baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It was a pledge to lead a new life. The Judean's who gathered around the filth and murk of the Jordan river, much like the surface of the deep that we find in our Old Testament lesson, confessed their sins and were baptized as a symbol that they leaving behind the chaos of their old selves on the muddy floor of the river and being reborn. We can see John dunking a Samaritan mother of three with gusto and while she's under water we can hear God shouting "Let there be light!" Behold a new creation. Separating light from dark. Going into the murk and leaving the darkness behind, arising a child of light so bright it's blinding.

The disciples that we meet in Acts are baptized in a similar fantastic manner. After the apostle Paul discovers, through a series of questions that seem to each time take a step further backward rather than forward, that these 12 disciples do not know the Holy Spirit. He lays his hands on them and they start speaking in tongues, prophesying, shouting, dancing and all sorts of celebration and tomfoolery. God speaks through the Holy Spirit and the sound is so loud it is deafening.

It seems as though in these passages that when God speaks, you can't possibly miss him. He's the voice that calls the light from the darkness, the voice that causes earthquakes and forest fires, the 6'3" uncle of yours who doesn't understand the meaning of "whisper" and is probably deaf in one ear. How often do we experience God like this in our own lives? I can think of a few

times where I was in a rut and prayed and prayed and prayed for direction only to see a subtle hint, to feel a slight nudge, and hear a still, small voice. We see this too when Jesus shows up at the Jordan.

In the gospel of Mark, Jesus arrives at the river undetected which was a luxury Jesus did not have very long into his ministry. It seems as though John himself didn't even know what he was getting into, although in other gospels he does notice Jesus and even protests, that it should be Jesus baptizing John himself and not the other way around. But Jesus didn't do that. John was right where he was supposed to be, doing exactly what he was supposed to be doing, and Jesus was affirming that by his own baptism. It was small, and subtle way to say "you're doing my will, you're exactly where I want you to be." Jesus own baptism also affirmed that baptism means nothing without repentance. As Christians, we are baptized once by water, and again by Spirit. And if we are baptized because we repent, then we are baptized daily, over and over, moment by moment every time that we chose to turn our life around and make his paths straight again. When we chose not to forgive, we return to the chaos we were brought out of. We cannot hear the voice of God through the traffic jam of our lives. And we cannot be forgiven. When we do not repent, we are fooling ourselves into thinking that God does not have the power to break us like the toothpicks that we are, and we deprive ourselves of his overwhelming love which is what actually breaks us in the end.

Our original baptism may not have been as outwardly incredible as those 12 disciples in Acts, it may not have been associated with an obvious and overt physical sign of God's approval, but I don't believe even Christ's baptism was accompanied by such a superficial thing. There were no trumpets, fanfare, or choirs of angels. Jesus life was defined by humility, his baptism was as well. When Jesus came out from under the water, the Spirit descended upon him like a dove, in peace and tranquility. I think there's a very good chance no one in the crowd even noticed what happened. Jesus was just another Hebrew who got dunked and moved on with his life. They might have noticed that he was a Nazarene, but only if they were paying close attention. Nothing amazing, nothing fantastic. No one even saw what had happened. No one really heard a voice since it was so windy by the river.

No one except Mark. The last Mark I described that is. The visual one who got lost filing away the details of John the Baptist's clothes. He saw what happened that day. He saw the heavens open, he felt the Spirit descend like the wind from the wings of a dove, and he heard the still, small voice of God say "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And he continued starting until long after Jesus had left the Jordan. And he had to sprint to catch up with him.

Let's leave today without holding on to any resentment, forgiving and repenting. And let us remember our original baptism, and to be prepared for the next. And most of all, let us be quiet; able to hear that still, small voice.