

Children of God
Mark 1: 4-11
The Baptism of the Lord – January 8, 2012
The Presbyterian Church of Dover DE

Purple, white, green, purple, white, red, green. What do those colors mean to us? They are the cycle of colors for the different seasons of the liturgical year, the church's year of worship. It is a cycle that repeats itself year after year after year. The church has discovered that learning takes place as we repeat things, year after year after year. The church has learned that it's very useful to have a season of Advent that prepares us, a season of Christmas to celebrate the birth of Christ, a season of Epiphany (in which we are now) to absorb the light that has come into the world. Then there is Lent, a time of confession, self-reflection, discipline, and preparation, as we get ready for Holy Week. Holy Week prepares us for Good Friday because at least one day during the year we must remember the cross. Then comes the glory of Easter and its season, followed by Pentecost when we celebrate the work of the Holy Spirit. Then there is the "ordinary" time that brings us back to start the cycle again. But it teaches us. And if we allow the rhythms of our lives somehow to take up the rhythm of the church year, we will discover Christ coming into our lives in new and different ways in each season.

Today is one of those seemingly obscure liturgical holidays. Today is called the "Baptism of the Lord" Sunday. Each year, on the Sunday after Epiphany (Jan. 6) we have this observance. It may strike a lot of folks as just one more thing that the pastor seems to be interested in but most people patiently endure. In the three year lectionary cycle, we rotate among the gospel writers' accounts of this event. In Year A, we hear Matthew's account; in Year B (our current year), we hear Mark's account; and in Year C we will hear from Luke. Each year we remember how Jesus went to the River Jordan to be baptized by John, remembering the importance of that event in the whole scheme

of his life – and in doing that, remembering the importance of our own baptisms for the whole scheme of our lives.

In order to help us remember that importance, I would like to look at two aspects of the baptism of our Lord. First, in his baptism Jesus claimed his identity as God's son, as God's child. And second, in his baptism Jesus accepted the peace and responsibility that came from that knowledge.

In Mark's account of this story, Jesus is the only one who hears the voice of God saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." There is an old saying that goes "They who dance are thought mad by those who cannot hear the music." One of the main themes of the gospel according to Mark is the constant unfolding of the identity of Jesus as the Christ, the anointed one, the Son of God. This baptism in chapter one begins the story. It is clear that at least in the beginning, Jesus is the one who is dancing through life and not many others hear the music. It is, however, precisely because Jesus knows who he is that he can do what is before him. I have been enjoying a book of poetry by Madeleine L'Engle. These are poems of human struggle and God's grace. In each one she speaks in the voice of a biblical figure. There are several in which the voice belongs to Mary, the mother of Jesus. One is particularly appropriate to the sense of Jesus claiming his identity through his baptism. It is titled "Mary: after the baptism"

Yes, of course. On many days I doubted.
 My faith grew out of doubt. The child was good
 But other babies have been good. He shouted
 When he was hungry, like any child, for food.
 One simply does not think of the Messiah
 Cutting teeth, eating, and eliminating.
 He springs, full-grown, in the great Isaiah –
 God, servant, king. And I was waiting,
 Remembering in my heart the very things
 That caused my doubt: the angel's first appearing
 To me and then to Joseph; shepherds, kings,
 The flight to Egypt. Remembering was fearing;

Doubt helped. I had to face it all as true
The day John baptized him. Then he knew.

(Madeleine L'Engle, *A Cry Like a Bell*, Shall Publishers [Wheaton Library], 2000)

In our own baptisms God symbolically claims us. We are God's beloved children. This is our most true and important identity. Sometimes we forget that. But it is critical that we remember it. I have a few issues with the Disney animated film, *The Lion King*, but there is a scene in that movie that is helpful here. There is a scene when the young lion Simba has a moment of remembering his true identity. Previous to that moment, Simba has been separated from all that reminds him of who is really is. After his father's death, he has run away from home, away from his family, away from his responsibilities in the world. In fact, he has forsaken his true identity as a lion, much less the king of the lions. In his absence, his kingdom is taken over by forces of evil, ruled by his evil uncle, Scar. His kingdom has become a very dark and wounded place where there is no spiritual or physical nourishment for the animals who live there. The baboon "priest" Rafiki finds Simba in the jungle and calls him back to his identity. In John the Baptist fashion, Rafiki leads Simba to a pool of water. As Simba stares into the pool, it is not only his own face that is reflected, but also the face of his father appears. The father and son are inextricably linked. As Simba recognizes his father within himself, the heavens open and his father speaks directly to him, saying "Simba! You have forgotten who you are. You are more than what you have become. Remember who you are. You are my son and the one true king." In that moment Simba is transformed. He understands his true identity as the Lion King and sees the responsibility that his identity carries. He has a peace and a strength that allows him to return and bring light and healing to his kingdom.

That brings us to the second aspect of the baptism story. Jesus accepts the peace and responsibility that the knowledge of his true identity as God's Son brings.

We talked last year on this Sunday about how Jesus' baptism was his ordination service to his ministry. It's true. Claiming our true identities as children of God in baptism gives us the peace of Christ in our hearts, but also empowers us for our responsibilities as Christ's sisters and brothers.

Several years ago at the Westminster Worship & Music Conference in New Wilmington PA I heard a wonderful story about baptism from one of the faculty members, the Rev. Glauca Vasconcelos Wilkey. She grew up in Brazil, but has lived in this country most of her adult life. She is a gifted pastor, musician, and theologian. She preached in worship on the day that we reaffirmed our baptismal vows. She told us the story of a place in her childhood that was so wonderful. Her father was serving as an itinerant preacher, and his congregation was made up of a number of farming families in a remote corner of the state where she had been born, in the heartland of Brazil. Once a year, the people came to one place on a part of one of the farms in the area and stayed together for about a week.

The first year they were there, someone drew a sign at the gated entrance that read simply, "Ponto de Encontro," Portuguese for "Point of Encounter" or "The Gathering Place." The leaders chose the sight because it was easily accessible to all; it had a clean, living stream of water, near its source; and it had plenty of mango trees for shade and delicious fruit. The stream provided drinking water, but it also provided for the spiritual needs of the community. Because on Sunday, the final day at the gathering place, baptism was celebrated. Every year, on the Sunday we celebrate today, the Baptism of the Lord, the people gathered by that stream and reveled in living out the hymn that quickly became the theme song of that place: "Shall We Gather by the River."

Glauca said that as a child she could not have articulated that the warmth and love and the power of the place were possible because of the very presence of God's

spirit in that community, calling it, and her, “Beloved.” And she certainly didn’t think then about the ways in which her life outside the gathering place should portray her week by the river. She just knew it was wonderful and that she loved to sing “Shall We Gather by the River.” But as she grew older, she understood that if baptism for Jesus meant the coming of the Spirit, empowering him for gracious living, then there must be something more to baptism than the beauty of the water and the joy of friends at the gathering place. Remember the sign at the entrance gate? As the people entered, they read the words, “The Gathering Place.” Someone, however, scribbled two words on the *back* of that sign. When they left the place of new creation, the message they received sent them out into the world in the manner of Jesus Christ. For the gate to the world read, “Servants’ Entrance.”

Friends, just as baptism for Jesus was the beginning of a new life for a parched world, so our baptisms must not end at the font. They are carried out for the sake of the world. They identify us as God’s beloved children and empower us to re-enter the world through the “servants’ entrance.” Remember your baptism and be thankful.

And to God be the glory this day and forever more. Amen.