

“Don’t Dry Off”

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Text: Mark 1:9-11

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It was a question that early Christians didn’t like to hear. It was a question that made them feel uncomfortable. It was a question that caused them to shuffle their feet, look down at the ground, cough a few times. The question those early Christians didn’t want to hear was this: “Why was I baptized?”

There was some early Christian difficulty with, if not outright embarrassment, over the fact that Jesus was baptized. It must have been a problem. Why else would Matthew, in his gospel, add a conversation between John and Jesus concerning the reason for Jesus being baptized – a conversation that Mark doesn’t have? Why, the early church wondered, would a sinless man need to be baptized? It was a troublesome question. Later Christian writings convert the baptismal scene into a grand miracle with bright lights, fire on the surface of the water, and a voice proclaiming Christ’s divinity. That the baptism of Jesus was a real concern is evidenced in two non-canonical gospels – gospels not included in the New Testament. The gospel according to the Ebionites quotes John, after the voice has spoken from heaven, as asking Jesus to baptize him. The gospel according to Nazarenes reads: “Behold, the Lord’s mother and his brothers said to him: John the Baptist baptizes for the remission of sins; let us go and be baptized by him. But Jesus said to them: In what have I sinned, that I should go and be baptized by him? Unless perhaps this very word which I have just spoken is a sin of ignorance.”

The baptism of Jesus was a concern for early Christians – what about today? Did you ever wonder why Jesus was baptized? Some suggested the reason Jesus was baptized was that He was ready to renounce the sheltered life of home – ready to begin His dangerous mission – ready to give up His home to become a homeless man who had nowhere to lay His head. Another reason was it allowed Jesus to take upon Himself the common sin of humanity – not becoming a party to the sin, but to share the shame and pain. In other words, Jesus went through the experience of a corporate act of repentance – He repented with other humans to redeem humanity in God. The third explanation – Jesus sought baptism because He knew God had a commission to lay upon Him and that God’s spirit could do its best work in this manner.

There is truth in all three, but I think our attention should be not so much on why Jesus was baptized, but upon the consequences of the baptism. To do that we return to the text. In Mark there is no conversation between John and Jesus, no details, no discussion, no question of “why are you here?” Even though John is the baptizer, Jesus’ baptism doesn’t include the confession and repentance Mark indicates John required of others. What is the focus for Mark? The focus is really upon what Jesus hears after the baptism. As Jesus comes out of the water, what Jesus perceives seems to be made known apparently only to Him. Jesus sees the heavens torn apart; He sees also the Spirit descending like a dove on Him and Jesus hears a voice from heaven speaking to Him in the first person.

The opening of heaven signifies God’s decisive intervention. At the time Mark was writing, Jews were complaining that divine assistance no longer came. It was as if a barricade had been placed between heaven and earth. But with the baptism of Jesus, things change. The opening of heaven signifies God’s decisive intervention. After a long period which had been devoid of the Spirit, God begins to speak again – this time conclusively. God’s silence is over, even though for the time being, Jesus is the only one who is aware of the fact.

The baptism of Jesus, then, is His induction, if you will, into the office of the Son of God, corresponding to the enthronement of an Israelite king. Put another way, for Jesus, baptism is His ordination into the ministry. It is both a corporate event and a personal one. It is a corporate experience in that He comes to join the movement of John the Baptist by submitting to John’s baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, thus identifying with those who embraced that wilderness message and the symbolic washing in the river Jordan.

It’s significant, I believe, that we learned earlier in chapter one of Mark that the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem are included in John’s ministry. Jesus thus identifies with the prophetic ministry to Judah and with all those who acknowledged their need for cleansing and hope. The completion of Jesus’ baptism is also a personal event, centered in the realization of His unique identity and His relationship with God. In this individual and corporate act, Jesus is set apart for a special ministry. Jesus’

baptism is His ordination into the ministry. I believe it's the same for all of us. As I've suggested to you before, when you were baptized, you were inducted or ordained into the priesthood of all believers. You and I are ministers, we're all in some form of ministry – professional ministry, of which I am a part; licensed ministry, of which Stephanie is a part, and lay ministry, of which each of you is a part. We are indeed partners in the gospel – partners in the ministry.

During the past year, we took steps as a congregation to strengthen the ministry which we share. The Board of Elders took responsibility in forming the care cluster program. It was established to provide another way in which members can reach out to each other, and to assist church folk to feel more connected and cared for. Those clusters will remain the same for 2006, with some minor leadership changes. The level of activity has varied from cluster to cluster, but we are committed to ensuring that every cluster function effectively and that those who participate will experience a deeper level of caring and a sense of belonging.

We also spent time this past year deepening our understanding of stewardship. Through the use of the 33 Days of Stewardship material and an emphasis upon tithing, we not only highlighted the joy and responsibility of giving, but strengthened the financial foundation of our congregation's ministry. We saw an increase of \$30,000 in money pledged for 2006 compared with 2005.

We also had about 50 people engaged in a study of spiritual gifts. Those who participated had an opportunity to discover their gifts and how those gifts could be utilized within the church.

And finally, as one of the steps we are taking to implement the recommendations of the Church Visionary Task Force, we have adopted a new way of structuring our congregation's ministry. We are setting aside the functional committee and church board system in favor of using ministry areas and a coordinating council to give oversight and direction. This is not a change for the sake of change. Rather, this is intended to make it easier for persons to become involved in ministries for which they have an interest or passion and for which they have the appropriate spiritual gifts. We want to nurture the idea of call – that God calls each of us to use our gifts in a particular ministry. While some meetings are necessary and important, we want to have people spending their time and energy doing ministry. We want an ongoing structure that serves us, rather than the other way around. We want to assist people to find their ministries and feel confident that they are doing not church work, but the work of the church.

Again, this is not change for the sake of change. This is a change that acknowledges that the way of "doing church" of the past fifty years is no longer helpful, and that we need to be open to different ways of not only structuring our ministry but conveying our message.

As I suggested before, I want us to be a congregation that is enriched and informed by our past, but not held hostage to it. Let us be a congregation that is never stricken with institutional Alzheimer's disease. A church suffering from this disease will exhibit one of two symptoms. The first symptom manifests itself when a congregation is stuck in the past. It stumbles around, muttering to itself the same seven deadly words: "We've never done it that way before." The focus is upon the glory years, the good old days, but those days are long gone. A congregation with this symptom refuses to acknowledge that times have changed. The second symptom of institutional Alzheimer's is losing touch with the past. Traditions and histories are forgotten, the saints of the congregation are no longer remembered. Without an appreciation of its roots, the congregation doesn't know where it's going, because it has forgotten where it has been. Let us strive to be, then, a congregation that remembers its stories and crises, its triumphs, its saints and sinners, its turning points and learning points. A congregation which appreciates the strength of its past, but is willing to try new things and take risks in the pursuit of faithfulness in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Since you've been inducted or ordained into the ministry of the laity, we want you to look ahead. You'll hear more at the annual meeting about the new structure and ways in which you can be involved. We want to help you find your ministry. But I also want you today to look back and remember your ordination – your baptism, or if you were baptized as an infant, recall stories about your baptism. Frederick Buechner says this about the waters of baptism – "Going under symbolizes the end of everything about your life that is less than human. Coming up again symbolizes the beginning in you of something new and hopeful. You can breathe again!"

Would you like to breathe again? Would you like to begin again? Is God calling us this morning for no more business as usual, that it's time to make some changes in the way we live our lives? Maybe we've

strayed just a little off the path – maybe we’ve strayed a lot and ended up in a ditch – maybe we’re just in a rut. Maybe we’re sitting on the bank of the river, afraid to get in the water and yet finding fault with those who’ve responded. I ask all of you something simple, yet profound: Do you believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and do you continue to accept Him as Savior and Lord? If so, please say “I do!” Do you now rededicate yourself as a response to that recognition and confession of Christ, to live a life pleasing to God, and remain true to your confession as long as you live? If so, please say “I do!”

There is a story of a worldly man who’d been converted, wanted to change his life, sought to join a church, and was baptized. As he was coming out of the water, he shouted, “Hallelujah, it’s finished!” One wise elder nearby said, “No brother, it’s just beginning.”