

# “From Heaven”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – January 11, 2009*

Baptism of our Lord

Rev. John Wahl

Psalm 29

Mark 1:4-11

One of my favorite movies – which contains several great references to baptism – is the Coen Brothers film “O Brother, Where Art Thou?” Filmed in black and white and set in the 1920’s in Mississippi, it’s the story of three convicts who have escaped from the chain gang and are on the run from the law. The leader of this small band of escapees, Everett, played by George Clooney, considers himself a sophisticate: he is a connoisseur of language, a skeptic of all things religious, and is ever-concerned about having an ample supply of hair gel; but only the best brand – “Dapper Dan” – will do.

Having managed to escape from the shackles of their imprisonment, Everett entices his two partners-in-crime to undergo a quest for buried treasure which – as is later revealed – is merely his ruse to go home and re-unite with his wife and children. Along the way, they meet the Governor, become an overnight musical sensation called “The Soggy Bottom Boys” and encounter a wide array of bizarre characters and adventures.

At one point, the three escaped convicts come across the surreal sight of a group of church people dressed in white, singing as they move mysteriously through the woods towards the river. After following their voices, they find the people lining up to be baptized. Everett’s two less-worldly friends, Pete and Delmar, rush into the water to be baptized. As he emerges from the water, Pete announces that the minister said all his sins have been washed away. Even, he says, when he stole that pig for which he’d been convicted and sent to prison. “But you said you were innocent of that,” Delmar replied. “Well, I lied.... and now that’s been washed away too!!”

After telling him that they had waded in the waters with the singing church-people, Everett tries to take the air out of their new-found optimism. “Baptism!” he says, “you two’re just dumber’n a bag of hammers.”

“Well, the Preacher said it absolved us,” Pete responds.

Everett then says, “True enough, for him, but not for the law. I’m surprised at you, Pete, I gave you credit for more brains than Delmar.

Which leads Delmar to join in the conversation, saying” “but, there was witnesses that seen us redeemed.”

“That’s not the issue Delmar,” Everett responds. “Even if that did put you square with the Lord, the State of Mississippi’s a little more hard-nosed.”

As much as we appreciate the powerful image that water plays in scripture: from stories of Noah and the Flood to Moses and the Red Sea; and as much as we personally experience the need to be cleansed of our personal and corporate sins, the concept of baptism is hard to grasp. If the baptism is performed on infant children, then what sins could they need to be washed away and what understanding could they possibly grasp from the experience. But, even for adults, we know that the sacrament of baptism does not produce a life of never sinning again. Although cleansed in the waters, we can and certainly will become stained by sin again. And if our sins can be removed from us through repentance and forgiveness, what is baptism's purpose?

In Mark's gospel, Jesus' introduction comes in the waters of baptism. He comes to be with John in anonymity, at the very outset of his ministry, not yet recognized for his healings, his miracles, his power over unclean spirits, his wise teachings, his faithful followers, his identity as God's Son or his willingness to suffer. But, while Jesus has not yet distinguished himself, we do not believe he had defiled himself. If John was offering to the people who came out to see him in the wilderness *a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins* (v. 4) why does Jesus come to the Jordan River to be baptized? And, if Jesus did not come to have his sins washed away, what was his baptism for? And what, then, might our baptisms be for?

Barbara Brown Taylor has written, wondering: "What was Jesus doing in that crowd of sinners, looking and acting like one of them? What did he have to be sorry about, and why was God's beloved submitting himself to a scruffy character like John?"<sup>1</sup> John knew the one coming after him would be greater than him, but now, here he was: in the river, wading in with the rest of them, standing with the liars and thieves; the tax-collectors and tax-evaders.

When Jesus went down in the waters of the Jordan, he did so in solidarity with sinners. Jesus' baptism was a demonstration of his obedience to God, a call he would soon be putting in the ear of all who wanted to follow him. This is the way, Jesus said: wash off the old dirt, shake the dust of sin from your feet. God has created a new day and a new way. Come walk with me out of darkness into the light of day. As a company of sinners went into the water, they began to fall in line behind Jesus and began to realize who Jesus was and together they walked toward Jerusalem. God looked at them – not just him, but them – and was very pleased.<sup>2</sup>

When I was in Kentucky for New Year's, I ran into some friends of mine who, about seven years ago, had asked me to baptize their son. I had known both of them since I was a teenager – Gary was one of the offensive linemen on my high school football team who, more often than not, would fail to complete his blocking assignment leading to my getting pummeled while trying to run the ball. Their son, Grant's baptism was my first as an ordained minister, but now – as I saw him a week and a half ago – he is a second-grader, an avid soccer player – thank goodness, and a dead ringer for his dad. After our conversation, when I turned away to speak to someone else, I heard Gary, the dad, say to his son, Grant, "you know who that is, right, he is the man who Christened you."

I think maybe that is the best description of what baptism truly is – becoming Christened. Did Jesus need to stand in the waters with all the other sinners to be baptized by John? Not for

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, "The River of Life" in *Home By Another Way*

<sup>2</sup> Mary Anderson, "The Waters of Solidarity"

his own sake or salvation, no, but for your sake and your salvation, most definitely. It is, as our text this morning describes, that point at which heaven tears open so that God's voice and Spirit might descend upon us. In the moment of Jesus' baptism, heaven and earth become transparent to one another. Jesus looks to the heavens in love – thankful to be standing with all those sinners – and the voice calls out to him in love. Through that loving relationship between Father and Son, Creator and Redeemer, we can know that when Christ was with us, God was also with us, and that when we are baptized as Christ was, we become connected to that same Spirit of divine love and presence. “Jesus did not receive the Spirit in order to enjoy privately its spiritual benefits, but rather in order to pass it on.”<sup>3</sup>

Curiously, though, even though he was in the midst of a crowd at the River, Mark presents his story of Jesus' baptism as a private affair. The heavens tear open and the voice calls out but only Jesus can see and hear it. While we, as Mark's readers, learn from the very outset that this seemingly ordinary man who shows up in anonymity is the Son of God, this truth is revealed only gradually to the actual witnesses to his words and actions. Two more times in Mark's gospel, the skies will be torn open – the line between heaven and earth will become transparent, and Christ's identity will be made known. The former takes place when Jesus and two of his disciples climb the Mount of Transfiguration where Jesus is seen standing with the great prophets of the Hebrew tradition. From the light shining on Jesus' face, these two select followers come to understand that this is not merely another prophet, but the messiah – that God not only speaks to Jesus but through him and as him.

Finally, at the close of Mark's gospel, there is – at the crucifixion – not lightness but a darkened sky. There is a tearing, not of heaven opening up, but the curtain of the temple ripped from top to bottom. Christ's identity is revealed not to his disciples, who have fled for the hills, but to a Roman soldier, declaring *truly, this man was God's Son*. (15:39) The new age that John declared at the River Jordan had arrived, a time when Christ's baptism had been made complete by obediently following the path of salvation – not his own, but the one laid out for all of us.”

However we understand the New Testament and the church's teachings about baptism, we can acknowledge that in baptism every Christian becomes a participant in the new creation. While the heavens are not rent in two and no divine voice declares us members of God's family, our baptism seals our relationship to a gracious and loving God. It is the beginning of the good news that we are part of God's new creation. The point of baptism is to give and assure us of our most fundamental identity, as members of the family of faith.

Jesus' baptism is tied to a history that leads back from John the Baptist to Isaiah to the first words of Genesis. For in the beginning, the Spirit descends and moves within and among us. Our new life is bound to those who have prepared us for faith; and through them to the history of the church; back to the good news of Jesus Christ, God's Son; further back to the affirmations and promises of the "First Testament;" and further back still to God's kindness and goodness in creating the universe.

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<sup>3</sup> Lee Barrett in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 1

In our baptism the God who makes all things new makes us new, too, but brings us as new creatures into an ongoing saving history.<sup>4</sup>

In our baptism – as well as in the remembrance and renewal of our baptism – we are Christened, united with a Christ who chose to stand in our midst – to be lumped together with all of us who fail to resist temptation and are sometimes not faithful to our calling; with those of us who wash ourselves off and fall right back in the puddle again. That is where Christ chooses to be; we are the people of God who Christ gathers and sends out to be his eyes and ears, hands and feet in the world; the church is where Jesus has established himself as the head and positioned us to be parts of the same body – interdependent with one another while ever-dependant on the power of the Spirit in our midst. When we join Jesus in the waters of baptism, we recognize that we have been Christ-chosen; and with that God is well pleased. AMEN.

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<sup>4</sup> David Bartlett, “New and Old Together”