

Called By God – Part 1

“Baptized & Blessed”

Baptism of the Lord Sunday (1st Sunday in Ordinary Time)

Genesis 1: 1-5

Mark 1: 4-11

Jan. 7, 2018

Rev. Rob Carter

Prayer for Illumination

Spirit of Creation... Spirit of Redemption... Spirit of Life and Hope...

Speak to us now, we pray.

Speak to us here, amid these words of Scripture read and proclaimed.

Speak to our minds... our hearts...

That we would hear and respond and follow where your wind you lead us.

Amen.

Mark 1: 4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness,

proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

And people from the whole Judean country side

and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him,

and were baptized by him in the river Jordan,

confessing their sins.

Now John was clothed with camel's hair,

with a leather belt around his waist,

and he ate locusts and wild honey.

He proclaimed,

“The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me;

I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.

I have baptized you with water;

but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee

and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

And just as he was coming up out of the water,

he saw the heavens torn apart

and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.

And a voice came from heaven,

“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

For the Word of God in Scripture; For the Word of God among us; For the Word of God within us.

Called By God – Part 1
 “Baptized & Blessed”

Do you remember your baptism?

If you do, I’m sure it had little resemblance to the one we just read about. For starters, if you were baptized in the Presbyterian tradition odds are you weren’t immersed in a river, but had water dropped on your forehead. But more than that, in any of the baptisms I’ve been blessed to witness or be a part of, I have yet to see the heavens torn apart or a dove descend or a voice come calling from heaven. Just doesn’t happen.

As for me (and like most of you, I suspect), I have no recollection of my own baptism. And from what I’m told, it didn’t go well. When my parents took me up to the font, I spit up all down my dad’s back, and then proceeded to scream throughout the rest of the service.

It doesn’t matter that it didn’t go very smoothly, though. Just as it doesn’t matter that I can’t remember it all. The point is... I was baptized.

And to this day, of all the pastoral perks with which pastors are blessed—and there are quite a few perks—my absolute favorite is baptism!

Dove or no dove... voice from heaven or no voice... baptizing an infant or a child or a full-fledge adult... there’s just something so beautiful and fresh... something so vibrant and life-giving that takes place at the font.

Of course, it could be the water. I mean, water is foundational to our world. As our first lesson reveals, “In the (very, very) beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters” (Gen. 1: 1-3).

So as God set out to create a world where previously none existed... the very first thing God did was send a wind sweeping over the waters. But it’s more than that. Dig a little bit deeper and we see that the word translated here as “wind,” the Hebrew word, *ruah*, actually means more than wind. It means wind but also breath... breath but also Spirit.¹ So then, at the very beginning of the creation of life, the wind of God... the breath of God... the Spirit of God blows God’s purpose into creation by moving and shaping the water of the world in order to bring life and form into the world.

God’s very own breath-blown, spirit-filled waters... forming the very beginnings of life. Spirit-filled waters... breathing new life where previously none existed... Spirit-filled waters breathing life into the beginnings of not just any world... but God’s world.

It’s water bearing new life... first into creation... and then, as we see at the font... into us.

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Now fast forward umpteen million years to the very beginning of Mark’s gospel, which we read today, and we don’t find Mark making too big a fuss about the water. Mark just mentions it, really.

¹ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. Editors of *The Brown-Driver Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. 1999). 924.

But that doesn't mean water wasn't important to Mark. For Mark only mentions what he considers essential. It's why his gospel is so much shorter than the others. His is a gospel that cuts right to the chase. No tangents. Barely even descriptors. Because, for Mark, the good news of Jesus Christ is so transformational, so urgent to share, you just get to the best parts as fast as you can.

This may be why Mark's Gospel begins the way it does. It's got no introductory prologue introducing Jesus, as John's Gospel has. And notice that Mark makes no mention of a virgin mother; no engaged couple making their way to Bethlehem. Neither does Mark even hint at shepherds or wise men. Mark just cuts right to the heart of the matter—Jesus' mission and ministry.

A mission and ministry that begin—as all four gospels tell it—with Jesus' baptism.

It's one of the few things all four gospels share. Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan river. And it was not until he was baptized... and the heavens were torn apart and that dove came down and a voice declared, "You are my Son, the beloved. With You I am well pleased," that Jesus' mission and ministry began to take shape.

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Did you know that? As all four gospels tell it, Jesus mission and ministry don't begin until he's baptized... when he comes face to face with the water of baptism... and hears God name him and claim him and proclaim once and for all that no matter what Jesus does from that point on... no matter where Jesus goes... no matter the truth he reveals or doesn't reveal... no matter the miracles he performs or doesn't perform... no matter the death on a cross he suffers or doesn't suffer... nothing he does will ever change the truth of who Jesus is—God's beloved child, with whom God is well pleased.

Of course, we gather here today to celebrate Jesus' baptism because of the mission and ministry that Jesus went on to lead—for you and me and the whole world thereafter. For the baptism of Jesus marked a turning point in his life. It was the dawning of a new day for him... a new way amid a new life... whereupon Jesus would spend every ensuing moment of every ensuing day giving every ounce of himself for the kingdom of God within and around him.

And it all began, friends, in the waters of the Jordan River as he came out of the waters and heard himself named and claimed and blessed by God! For it was then that Jesus saw, once and for all, who and whose he was... discovering that his life wasn't his own. He was blessed to belong to God.

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Frankly, it's the radical, slap-in-your-face truth of baptism. As surely as the waters point us to creation and our creator, the spirit-filled waters of baptism remind us that you and I—*we* are not our own, either. We, too, belong to the one who breathed life into us... We, too, belong to the One who has given us all that we are and have. As God proclaims in our baptisms, "You are who I say you are. You are my child, my beloved. With you, I am well pleased"

Granted... our baptisms don't come with a great and grand tearing of the heavens or birds coming down or a bellowing voice calling out to us. In fact, we don't believe that Baptism in and of itself actually forces God to name us or claim or bless us. Rather, what he proclaim is that

baptism is a visible sign of an invisible reality. We proclaim that in the waters of baptism, we behold the blessings of God that are true for from the moment we come into this world.

And the blessings baptism reveals are nothing less than the blessings Jesus beheld.

For when we look hard enough, what we find each and every time we look into baptism is blessing.

Blessed to be known by God. And not just known.

Blessed to be named by God. And not just named.

Blessed to be claimed by God. And not just claimed.

Blessed to be loved by God. And not just loved.

Blessed to be forgiven by God. And not just forgiven.

Blessed with gifts from God. And not just gifts.

Blessed with a call to use these gifts.

Put it all together... named and claimed... loved and forgiven... equipped and called, and at its heart, baptism blesses us with two overarching gifts many people in this world spend their whole lives searching for but never finding: identity and purpose. Identity and purpose!

In baptism, friends, we are given our identity as God's beloved child.

And as God's beloved, we're given a life-long purpose. To live for God. To value and love the people and causes God calls us to value and love. That we might spend ourselves as Jesus did—revealing the kingdom of God within and around us.

Of course, it's hard for us to keep our focus on the truth our baptisms proclaim. After all, we spend our days being assaulted with all kinds of counter-claims as to who we are and what we should do. But as those who belong to God, we remember what God has already made clear, once and for all, amid the waters of baptism.

So this morning, we join together in a congregational reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant, celebrating the blessings of baptism and the truth within us all—we are named and claimed... loved and forgiven... gifted and called... given an identity... And blessed with a purpose.