

Sermon: Rev Susanna Pain
11 January 2009

Baptism of Jesus – Year B

READING

Mark 1: 4-11

John appeared in the wilderness dressed like the prophet Elijah. He appeared, baptising at the Jordan River,
the liminal place
between journey and the promised land,
between exile and coming home,
where Abraham stopped and
the people of Israel crossed over the place of decision.

This place held so many resonances with the past and glimpses of hope for the future.

The people came to hear the wild prophet perceived as a subversive threat by Herod and his court. The people came to hear him, looking for hope, trying to make sense of the present and look toward the future, ready for tough words – like sin, repentance, and baptism.

There is tension and expectation. The prophet Malachi, the last in the Hebrew scriptures, promised or warned ‘Behold I will send you Elijah, before the great and terrible day of the Lord arrives’ (Mal. 4:5). So, is this the beginning or the end, we wonder? (Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, p.127)

Now Jesus appears, standing in line with the rest of them. A nobody from an unremarkable place (Ched Myers, p.128), without credentials, from up north – somewhere regarded with contempt and suspicion by most southern Jews.

Who knows what Jesus was thinking, what he was feeling, as he moved forward to be baptised. Was he nervous? Excited? This was a turning point in his life, attested to by all four Gospels, an important ritual, a new beginning. What did it mean for him?

‘The heavens were torn in two’, we read. ‘The Holy Spirit appeared like a dove’; and the Voice said:

‘You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased’,

which in Mark’s gospel, only Jesus hears, but we are allowed in to the secret. We know. Jesus disciples however spend the whole gospel finding out.

It is hard to articulate his experience, this moment of affirmation, after drowning in the water –
a blessing,
a high point surely, before a testing time and beginning of public ministry.

It is full of meaning & significance on a number of levels.

Jesus stood in the queue with everyone else waiting to start again, waiting for a new beginning, waiting for a blessing –
letting go, saying sorry,
emptying, opening up.

Jesus stood in the queue with the rest of them
and God said, 'you are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased'.

Mark relates this as an inner experience of Jesus – his unique call, but at the same time gives us a glimpse of who Jesus is. In the coming weeks we will read of Jesus' words and deeds, culminating first in his transfiguration and the voice again, and then, after the move to Jerusalem, in his passion – his death and resurrection.

The baptism of Jesus gives a context – sets the scene, if you like, to hear these stories, the whole story of redemption. This liturgical pilgrimage with Jesus from Galilee and the Jordan River to Jerusalem is a paradigm for our whole Christian life of discipleship, which was inaugurated for us at our baptism. (Reginald H Fuller, *Preaching the Lectionary*)

This 'Baptism of Jesus Sunday' is particularly poignant for me as I prepare to baptise my nieces, Tara and Jemma, next Saturday, here at Holy Covenant. Tara is nine and Jemma is seven, and they have decided that they want to be baptised. They have made this decision with no encouragement from their parents.

They have learned about baptism perhaps from friends, and from religious education in their public school in Sydney.

They have been thinking about this over the past 12 months. It is not a passing phase. I am quite excited and have been spending considerable time thinking about how we can make this day special and let them know they are loved. It is not often that I baptise children who come of their own accord, to say 'yes' to God.

I wonder, what does baptism mean to you?

I was baptised as a tiny baby, by my grandfather, in Barker College Chapel in Sydney – joining me with a long line of Christian family. It was a decisive moment I cannot recall.

What have been the defining moments in your life? What did they lead to?

How do you respond to hearing God call you 'beloved'?

Henri Nouwen says:

'All I want to say to you is, 'You are the beloved', and all I hope is that you can hear these words as spoken to you with all the tenderness and force that love can hold. My only desire is to make these words reverberate in every corner of your being.' (Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*, NY Crossroad, 1992)

Sara Miles writes:

I was unloading groceries one Friday when I spotted Sasha standing out back by the baptismal font, as if she were waiting for someone. Sasha was a very small black girl, maybe six or seven years old, who usually came to the pantry with an impatient, teenage aunt. I'd never met her mother. Sasha's hair wasn't always combed, and this day she had a split lip. "Sweetheart!" I said. I was glad to see her again. "Want a snack? There's some chips inside."

Sasha looked at me, not smiling. "Is this water the water God puts on you to make you safe?" she demanded abruptly, in a strangely formal voice.

I put down my boxes. What was she asking for? Was I being asked to baptise her? My mind raced, flashing back to when I'd stood at the font for my own baptism just a few years ago.

Nothing about that water had made me safe. It had pushed me further out from the certainties and habits of my former life, taken me away from my family, and launched me on this mad and frustrating mission to feed multitudes. It had eroded my identity as an objective journalist and given me an unsettling glimpse of how very little I knew. I was no less flawed or frightened or capable of being hurt than I'd been before my conversion, and now, in addition, I was adrift in this water, yoked together with all kinds of other Christians, many of whom I didn't like or trust.

How could I tell this child that a drop of water could make her safe? I had no idea what Sasha was going through at home, but I suspected it was rough. And baptism, if it signified anything, signified the unavoidable reality of the cross at the heart of Christian faith. It wasn't a magic charm but a reminder of God's presence in the midst of unresolved human pain.

I remembered what Lynn Baird had asked me, when I was contemplating baptism.

“Do you want it?” I asked.

Sasha locked her eyes on me. “Yes,” she said. “Yes, I want that water.”

There was something so serious in her face that it stopped me cold. I dipped my fingers into the font, and Sasha turned her face up to me, concentrating. I made the sign of the cross on her forehead.

I took Sasha into the church and found Lynn, who was trying valiantly to help out at the pantry, despite her illness. I was so glad she was there. Of all the priests at St. Gregory’s, Lynn was the one least fazed by suffering: She was, as the Bible said dryly of Jesus, “acquainted with grief.” I told her what had happened, and we walked over to the small wooden shrine by the preacher’s chair, where Lynn asked Sasha if she wanted a special blessing.

“Yes,” Sasha said again, gravely. “I want that.”

From the shrine, Lynn took the small container of oil and showed it to Sasha. The girl stood up, very still, in front of Lynn’s chair. “I’m going to put my hands on you and pray now, if you’re ready,” Lynn said, and Sasha nodded.

Behind us, a crowd was circling around the Table, gathering up rice and beans and Froot Loops cereal. A bunch of other kids were dodging in and out, shouting and punching one another and eating snacks. “Jesus is always with you,” Lynn told Sasha, as she finished rubbing the oil on her skin, “no matter what happens to you, even when bad things happen. You’re not ever alone.” Sasha closed her eyes for a moment, then looked down directly at the seated priest, and I saw something flowing between them: the child, crucified, anointing Lynn with the power of her crucifixion, and Lynn, receiving it, anointing Sasha.

...

Two weeks later, Sasha came back to the pantry with her aunt, who was lugging another baby. She ran up to me, leaped into my arms, kissed me, and said, “Let’s go find Lynn. I want a special blessing.” We anointed her again, and again Sasha received the oil deliberately, with great attention, listening to every word of our prayers. Then she corrected Lynn.

“It’s not AH-men,” Sasha said, “it’s A-men.”

I asked her what amen meant.

“It means thank you,” Sasha said.

Sara Miles, *Take this bread*, pp. 236-237

The minister might have said,

'You are my beloved child, with you I am well pleased.'