

Mark 1:4-11 (The Inclusive Bible)

And so John the Baptizer appeared in the desert, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to John and were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins. ⁶ John was clothed in camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and he ate nothing but grasshoppers and wild honey. ⁷ In the course of his preaching, John said, "One more powerful than I is to come after me. I am not fit to stoop and untie his sandal straps. ⁸ I have baptized you in water, but the One to come will baptize you in the Holy Spirit." ⁹ It was then that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan River by John. ¹⁰ Immediately upon coming out of the water, Jesus saw the heavens opening and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ Then a voice came from the heavens: "You are my Beloved, my Own. On you my favor rests."

“The Baptism of Jesus and this New Year” by Rev. Justin McNeill

In the church we often think about baptism as the beginning. Often, we think about it as the beginning of people’s life of faith, or the beginning of people’s relationship with a particular church or particular denomination. This morning, the baptism of Jesus is **similar** in that it marks the beginning of Jesus’s public ministry.

In the gospel of Mark, the baptism of Jesus is literally the beginning of the story of Jesus. Before this morning’s scripture, we only hear a short introduction of John the Baptist, likening him to the prophet Isaiah from the Hebrew Scriptures. John, who has only just begun to catch people’s attention as the one that would come to prepare the way and make straight the paths as the voice calling out from the wilderness. But even as John begins the story of Jesus, he speaks of the one that is coming after him that will be even greater than he; one that will bring about a change of faith and a change to the way that God is understood in people’s lives.

Jesus’s baptism is where the gospel story really begins and the people gathered begin to see that this person, Jesus, is that someone greater. It is the coming out party for Jesus where the heavens are opened up and a voice calls out “You are my Beloved, my Own. On you my favor rests.”

Yet, as much as this moment in time, of Jesus being baptised, is the beginning of the gospel story, and the beginning of Jesus's recorded ministry in Mark, it is not the beginning of the story of God or God's people.

Even as John the Baptist calls people out to be baptised in the waters of the Jordan. John is not the first one to think up or begin the practice of baptism. Baptism itself was taking place long before John's call for repentance and the forgiveness of sin.

The Jewish laws which had been passed down from generation to generation had several things to say about the need for ritual washing, as well as the most effective places for it to take place. Of all the options listed for these ritual immersions, there was a clear preference for the living waters found only in large natural bodies of water. Those places that were alive with God's creation in which people would be cleansed, made whole, and made ready temple service. This was not a one and done process of initiation but an intentional moment of cleansing and renewal that was to be repeated whenever required. Baptism itself has a history that dates back before the beginning of either John or Jesus's ministry. And even the words around those living waters, has a history that dates back well before Christianity.

Even as we look at the beginning of the gospel story in Mark, in which Jesus is made known to the people and begins his ministry, it isn't the beginning at all. But the same is true for baptism as a whole and for each of us. Regardless of when we are or have been baptised, it is not the beginning in the sense that there exists nothing before this moment. Our lives exist and our faith exists before those moments of water and prayer. Just as God exists in the world before Jesus is immersed and the heavens are opened up. But there is something that happens at baptism, in that moment of intention and recognition, that we take note of and lift up as important to us and to the church.

Baptism is a part of who we are as a people of faith. It is an important part of who we are as a family and as a community. I have heard countless stories of how important baptism has been for individuals who were baptised later in life or who have had their children baptised. I remember working with a youth who told me about how they themselves asked their parent to be baptised at the age of 10 and what that experience was like for her.

Baptism is one of our two sacraments in the United Church, right up there in importance with communion. And while we rationalise and theologize that the reason we hold these two rituals up in particular, is because Jesus himself took part in both Baptism and Communion.

But it is also important to note that both of these things happened in community.

Jesus does not go to John in the river Jordan asking all those gathered to leave so that he might be baptised in isolation. He gathers with the crowds, with those closest to him to be a part of it. It is the gathered community who bear witness to the sky being opened up to hear the heavens declare that this is the beloved. Just as Jesus gathers once again those closest to him to break the bread and share the cup. There is something special that happens because it takes place in community.

Author and theologian, **N. T. Wright** says “The primary point of baptism, then, is not so much ‘that it does something to the individual’, but that it defines the community.”

The mix of both the individual and the community; both joined together in the mystery and the moment of baptism. For me, baptism isn't about salvation, forgiveness, or even initiation by some particular process. It is not the beginning of a life of faith, where before this there was nothing of note. It is about recognising the divine in each one of us, in each other, and in each moment before and to come.

Baptism is about gathering at the river as the old hymn goes, whether that is in person or through the help of technology, to gather with the saints that have gone before and welcome those that will come after us as a baptised and baptising community in the name and in the example of Jesus the Christ, the beloved in whom we are all a part of.

Baptism is not a beginning or an end, but a pivotal moment of grace on the journey. Baptism is not about cleansing but rather a moment in time for deep and meaningful change. This is not a turning away from what was, as much as it is a renewal with intention of that which always has been but is now lifted up for all to see. An ushering in of a new era.

In this way baptism is like the turning of the page from one year to the next. From what was to that which will be. It is not a process of wiping the slate blank so as to ignore all that had come before, but rather a moment to renew and refresh what might be. To turn with intention, to recognise and remember the divine in our midst. Not the beginning of God's presence but a moment to draw attention to it.

I have heard a lot lately about getting rid and good riddance to 2020. And I agree that there is a lot about this past year that we would do well to move away from in this next year. But we cannot do this by

ignoring or erasing the experiences and the lessons of this past year. 2021 will only be different if we use this past year to inform and recreate this next one.

And maybe we do need to wash a few things away from this past year. Refresh and renew, turn over a new leaf and create something better, and maybe even cry out from the wilderness a baptism of repentance and forgiveness like John, but that is only possible if we act together as a community. We cannot simply wish or hope for a better year. We need to work to create it, especially when we continue to hear so many instances of violence and unrest.

The baptism of Jesus is a reminder that all can be made new and that with each moment we have the potential to be a new creation. But this does not happen overnight, or with the simple turning of the calendar page. It is an intentional process that we are each responsible for in our own lives, in our own communities, and as a part of the world around us. 2021 will certainly be a better year than this past one was, but that will not happen without each of us doing what we can to create that better year.

As we remember the baptism of Jesus, the heavens opening up and declaring the belovedness of Jesus and the ministry to which he would work to create; may we hear that same echo of belovedness in our lives, with the call to create a world and a year from that

which was. Using the trials and challenges, to create a community and a world that will continue to echo the blessings that we have before us.

I truly hope that 2021, this new year, will be better than the last. But I also hope that we don't forget all that we have experienced in 2020. The moments of challenge and the moments of hope. And that we use those moments to create a new year that is better than the last, in our lives and in the lives of those around us. Now and always. Amen.