

Mark 1:4-11

So John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And the whole Judean region 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 strap 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 upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my Son, the Beloved with you I am well pleased."

All names in the following stories have been changed to protect their privacy. How's THAT for a catchy start of a sermon.

Tina Valentine was baptized in her pastor's study at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian in Atlanta, Georgia. It was over half a century ago, and it was an act of mercy of sorts. She was a teenager in confirmation class and when she found out she was the only person who had not been baptized as an infant, she was crushed. Already, a shy and unassuming teen, to be baptized in front of the congregation while the rest of her friends were proceeding on to the next step of confirmation was too much for her. When she opened up with the Associate Pastor about her fears, he said this wouldn't be a problem. It was a pastoral situation. They arranged a date for to meet him with her parents in his office and brought the baptismal bowl in there. As he dipped his hand in the water, poured recently from the tap, she closed her eyes to receive the blessing, and water dripping slowly down her forehead.

Jonathan Miller was dunked in the creek at Mouth of Glisten, Virginia. It was the swimming hole in warmer months, and he loved to splash and play in the rapidly moving water with his friends. But on this day, he was dressed up, wearing his white button down, church shirt and dress slacks with his bare feet. The pastors' hands

guided him to the spot by the rock, hugged around his waist, and helped him slip down. On his way up, Jonathan sputtered with the shock of cold water and the weight of wet clothes, and his eyes locked with the saints of the church standing on the shore as they opened their mouths to sing "Amazing Grace."

Jayden Howard didn't remember a thing about his baptism. It was wrapped up with his first birthday. But his parents told him stories. And it was an important moment. His grandparents were in town, and his mom and dad had gone to classes to learn more about what the sacrament was in their new church. Caden was the star, they said tugging on the pastors' hair and babbling away. He acted like he belonged there. And the people in the pews grinned gladly, smiling widely when the baby came their way, hair still damp from the pastor's hand.

McKenna Legale was baptized in college. She joined a parachurch organization in which she first heard the story of Jesus Christ. The group said it was important to show your faith in this way. But she was never one to fall for peer pressure. She like to think things through, and she did and she knew baptism was something she wanted to do. To meet with her group leaders and ask questions of faith. To make public her desire for this commitment, to follow in Jesus's way. So when the time had come and the

pool was filled and she wore the cloth robe, she was ready. Of course, she was still nervous – or was it excited – but she sank deep into the waters of abundant life and new forgiveness of sin with hope for the future.

There are a variety of baptism stories. Even in this room – some of us were dunked in college or sprinkled by a pastor as an infant. Some of us haven't taken the sacramental plunge and are still considering this mystery.

We remember all of our baptism stories on this day in the liturgical calendar because no matter the venue, no matter the outfit, no matter the method of distribution of the water droplets, the sacrament is a mysterious and holy thing. Baptism is a sacrament.

In fact, the word sacrament comes from the Greek word for mystery. They are the visible signs of God's invisible grace made effective by the Holy Spirit. That means we believe God shows up for us, the Risen Lord is with us, in the bread, wine and the water. We believe in the waters of baptism the Holy Spirit moves.

Sometimes, many times, the church gets sidetracked by other conversations about baptism. Instead, we think of it as an entry rite, an approved way to belong to a group. This is not a new preoccupation. We are all familiar with

the historic debates and contemporary conversations around which is “better” the infant or believer’s baptism. But the truth is that Scripture tells us baptism is much, much more than a way to belong to a church. It is a holy mystery. It is in fact the promise of the real presence of the Holy Spirit. It is the inbreaking of the kingdom of God.

In scripture, the stories of baptisms are different too. And these names have NOT been changed, because of course their baptism stories; however, different, have been told for a very long time.

Do you remember the Ethiopian Eunuch? An Angel of the Lord told Philip to travel from Jerusalem to Gaza, when he runs across this court official of the Egyptian queen. Philip is called to cross over to his chariot and help him interpret the scripture he reads. Philip tells the Eunuch about Jesus, and it is, of course, good news. So as they travel along the road and they come to some water, the man says, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” Why nothing at all! Who can withhold the waters of baptism. And Philip baptizes the Eunuch in the creek. That’s a different story! And there’s more. This is an interesting side note, “When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing.”

There are also tales in scripture of households taking the plunge. It's where the church understands the scriptural warrant for infant baptism. It happens in Philippi, that foremost city of the part of Macedonia when Lydia of the purple cloth, a merchant from Thyritrea. And the Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household were baptized, she begged *us*, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And then she opened her house like an air bnb.

But of course the most prominent baptism story is the one we read today. A child was born and grew in divine and human favor, increasing in wisdom till it was time to begin his work. And luckily enough, his own cousin, was in the baptizing business.

So Jesus made his way down to the Jordan and through his cousin thought Jesus should baptize him – Jesus demanded it – that he would be baptized by John. And so he went down into the dark, chaotic waters and when he was pulled up by the familiar hands to face the work ahead of him, the Holy Spirit came. Tearing open the heavens descending like a dove upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my Son, the Beloved with you I am well pleased."

Friends, whatever your baptism story, if it was in a creek or a pastor's study, typical baptismal font or by the side of the road, in the waters of baptism, you take part in this baptism of Jesus Christ our Lord. While the dove descending and the outloud words were for the incarnate Word, Jesus, on the day he began his ministry in the world, the same phrase is offered to you too.

When you were pulled up from the waters, when the droplets ran down your cheek, you were claimed and called as God's very own. You were baptized with Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit, may we still hear these words today.

You are my beloved with you I am well pleased. Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Amen!

Creator God, we praise you For you are continually making all things new that the world might fulfill your good purpose.

Into the midst of our sin you offer you love in Jesus Christ who was baptized in the muddy waters of sin, identifying with us in our human weakness, yet without sin of his own so he could raise us from our watery graves into the Spirit's breath of new life.

Out of his own body offered for us and our salvation, Christ our Lord feeds us, nurturing us in the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Therefore we praise you with all the hosts of heaven who forever sing to the glory of your holy name, praying with them for the world you so love and offering ourselves in service to you on behalf of a hungry world.

Make us good stewards of your creation, O Lord, that generations to come might look upon your works of wonder and utter a breathless prayer of praise. Pour your Spirit out upon the poor that they might be filled with your abundance. Send forth your wisdom upon those in positions of authority that they might exercise their responsibilities with your justice and compassion. Set all those captive by sin free to delight in your love.

Now, O Lord, send forth your Holy Spirit upon us and all the faithful who join you at this table, that we might glimpse your glory among us and rise up as one to give you thanks in all we do, through Christ, with Christ, in Christ, in the unity of the Holy

Spirit, all glory and honor and dominion are yours, almighty God, now and forevermore. Amen.

: You are a good God who creates, gives birth, redeems, feeds, and encourages us to grow. Thank you for your many blessings to us. May those blessings now flow out to others in your name, we pray. Amen.