

Water Rights
Baptism of the Lord
January 11, 2015
Gordon Wiersma

Texts: Genesis 1:1-5
Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:4-11

This sermon started in January of 2010 – that’s a long sermon! – so it’s probably time to wrap it up. Unlike all of you, I actually do recall the sermon that I preached on the Baptism of the Lord Sunday in 2010 – and I basically asked in that sermon ‘why was Jesus baptized?’ – which was really the first time that question had occurred to me – and what has made that such an interesting and ongoing question to me is that it puts the baptisms that we do in the church in the context of Jesus’ baptism, which has for me opened up some fruitful paths to explore. But rather than rehash that question, I’d like to continue that sermon with what I think is a related question – it’s a question I’m still working on formulating, let alone answering, but goes something like this: ‘does “I am baptized” mean “you are not”?’ – in other words, is part of what is going on in baptism is that if I am baptized, it distinguishes me over against someone who is not? Now, for those of you familiar with some of my theological tendencies, it will come as no surprise that as this idea of a question has occurred to me - ‘does “I am baptized” mean “you are not”?’ - that the answer I see coming into view is ‘NO’! - I find in my faith a deep desire to be able to see my baptism (I was baptized as an infant at a Christian Reformed Church in Seattle, WA) not as a mark of separation or superiority, but as a gift that calls and connects. That’s my conclusion – so no need to keep any false suspense in this sermon. But I’ll ask you all to hear me out as to what difference this question and answer might make for any of us – baptized or not – not just as some abstract theological exercise but as something to do with our living, with what we make of the lives God has given us.

And what I want to do is to tease out some things about baptism from the texts we’ve heard today, and hear what they have to say about the question and answer I’ve posed for the day. And I’m going to do that in reverse order, starting with the Gospel story from Mark and then the lesson from Acts and then the Genesis story.

So – from Mark 1 - we hear the story of the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. Jesus' baptism is the starting point of Jesus' public ministry, and it's a story we hear in all 4 of the Gospels – each with a few different details, especially with the Gospel of John as is often the case – but in Matthew, Mark and Luke there is this precise shared story line as Jesus is baptized:
 ...the heavens were torn apart - and the Spirit descended like a dove on Jesus - and a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

What the gospels offer in this story is something essential about who Jesus is, which sends Jesus into the ministry ahead of him: Jesus is the beloved son of God and Jesus is filled with the Spirit of God from heaven. Clear enough – but given the question I've posed today, have you ever thought about this story in this way: 'does Jesus being the beloved Son of God mean that I am not?' Now, maybe that seems an odd question to you – for one thing, this story IS told in a way that distinguishes Jesus as unique: Jesus is the Son of, the child of, God in way that no one else is understood to be as a daughter, son, child of God. So in that sense an answer to 'does Jesus being the beloved Son of God mean that I am not?' is YES! – and it is definitely helpful not to confuse oneself with Jesus – not to have a Messiah complex. But the thing is, asking a question like that entirely misses the point of what is going on– the point of saying who Jesus is has at its core not a negation about who others are or not, but is a revelation of who God is. What is given in this story is an expression of a God who: ...tears open the heavens and comes down... whose Spirit is present in time and history... a God who is joined to human flesh and blood... who speaks of birth and love and life... So this distinctive, particular revelation from God to and through and about Jesus, has at its core not a separating Jesus off as unique, but a revelation of God reaching out to connect to humanity. The ministry of Jesus as the beloved child of God full of God's Spirit is carried out so that others see in Jesus their own story too – one commentator I read put it this way: "the life of Jesus is an ongoing parable of the embracing arms of God" (Clyde Fant in *Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 1, p.233*). This story of Jesus' baptism distinguishes Jesus in a very particular way, but it is a difference that reveals Jesus as uniquely able not to divide but connect.

That's Jesus' baptism in Mark - so let's carry with us what we've found in this Gospel story, and bring it to what we heard today from Acts. Acts moves us ahead to the story of the

church, a community formed by and seeking to follow the living and crucified and risen Jesus. And here, as the story of the early church is being told primarily through the lens of the travels of the Apostle Paul, there's this very interesting little story about baptism – a story which I think echoes that gospel story in Mark. Paul is in the Greek city of Ephesus – meets up with some new believers. Paul asks 'did you receive the Holy Spirit as believers?' – 'Holy Spirit?' they reply 'we haven't heard about a Holy Spirit' – 'How were you baptized?' Paul asks – 'into John's baptism' they reply – 'Oh!' Paul says (I added that part for effect ☺) 'John baptized for repentance in order to have people believe in the one coming after him, Jesus'...and so Paul baptizes them in the name of the Lord Jesus, and these believers then receive the Holy Spirit.

OK – let me offer a couple different paths to take from this text. One way to see what is happening here would be that Paul is basically saying "I have the Holy Spirit, and you do not!" – and this is a problem to fix so that they will achieve the same believer status that Paul does; so that then they will be able to say together: "we have the Holy Spirit and others do not!" Not surprisingly I do not think this is a helpful path to follow - but if you think I am just being facetious about that approach, the history of the church is full of arguments over which believer or church or leader 'has the Spirit' or not - or which gender or race, for that matter; divisions over who 'possesses' the Spirit (an odd idea if you think about it) more abundantly or not. And baptism is often at the heart of the argument –infant/adult/sprinkle/immersion? – debates over the gifts of the Spirit: are some better than others? There is a well-worn path determining who has the Spirit, or not.

Well - how about this path instead, with a sign on it that says: "believing in Jesus is not about negation but creation"? Now that may sound a bit abstract, but hear me out...When Paul says that the church does not practice the baptism of John but of Jesus – Paul is not dissing John the Baptist, but affirming what John himself said: that the 'repentance' of John – a turning away from, a negation – is never meant as something complete in itself, but is done to turn to something much more, to a creation: which is the Spirit of God given in the risen Christ – the reflection of Jesus' baptism played out in the lives of those who follow him. This story says to the church:

“Believing in Jesus is about the gifts of the Spirit of Jesus” – which means the story of Jesus and of the church is a creation story.

Which takes us in the end to Genesis, at the beginning:

In the beginning God created...in formless void the wind (RUACH - SPIRIT) of God swept over the waters...God said ‘Let there be light’...there was light...the light was good.

Do you hear that? - right there at the beginning, a baptism story – really! – the Spirit of God descends to stir the waters to begin creation – to create time, space, history itself; the Word of God brings the gift of light; the gifts of form and order, day and night, are brought into being. And who are these gifts for or not? who do they belong to or not? There is no NOT! – there is only FOR! - God baptizes creation as something which has as its core, gift: Spirit and water and Word and light and day and night – these are gifts to all, for all, always; FOR, rather than NOT, is essential to the very nature (pun intended) of how God creates.

And I think what that means, is that we are on a good path when we hear the story of Jesus’ baptism as we did – an ‘in the beginning story’, as God the Creator again reaches out with light and Word and blessing to embrace all – a creation story. We are on a good path when we hear that story in Acts as we did - an ‘in the beginning story’ as God the Creator baptizes the Church with Spirit and Word and light as gifts to bless with – a creation story. We are on a good path when we can see baptism as a creation story always in our midst – these waters at the heart of our sanctuary and faith and identity: sustained by God’s gifts of Spirit and Word, light and life. We are on a good path when baptism has nothing to do with who I am and you are NOT – but is a gift that shows me who all people are: created as children of God...and to see that all creation is a gift from God. We are on a good path when we see faith in our baptized Lord not as a distinction to separate us off, but as a calling that joins us to a God who reaches out to this world in light and life. We are on the right path, I think, when I don’t really care whether you are baptized or not (personally, I recommend it), because what my baptism in Jesus Christ makes me care about is creation – makes me care to face the void and chaos of this world ~ hatred and violence and injustice and poverty and terror and racism and war and any brokenness, whatever its name may be ~ and ask how God

can use my life in such brokenness as a story of creation – to seek for light and Word and life to be at work in and through me through God's Spirit in Christ; and whoever and however I and we are joined by others in that, baptized or not, well, God bless them – let's be about creation together.

This sermon started in January of 2010 – probably time to wrap it up now – but instead I will say 'to be continued': because God is not in the business of negation, but of Creation; and through Christ's Spirit it would seem the Church, the baptized, are to be about the same. AMEN.