

Sermon at New Song Episcopal Church
January 7, 2018
The Baptism of Jesus
The Rev. Mel Schlachter

All four Gospels give accounts of Jesus' baptism by John. Matthew, Luke and John seem acutely embarrassed that Jesus submits himself to John, whereas Mark has an eye on other things. The question begs to be asked, Why did a sinless member of the Trinity feel it necessary to be baptized for repentance of sins? Maybe these later doctrines here run into a very human Jesus.

No matter for Mark. John and Jesus are historically tied together. In this passage we see why Jesus can say later on, "Among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist, yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Mt. 11.11) John calls us and our society to shape up. He invokes a moral vision of what we can do to clean up our own motives and actions, and the institutions we are part of. I imagine him on the Potomac, up river from the District, or maybe in the District on the polluted Anacostia River as it flows through poverty, either way regaling all comers about their greed and pride, harm to the river and disregard for the poor.

John testifies to all that we can do ourselves for ourselves. That severe morality needs our serious attention, yet by itself won't take us where Jesus means for us to go.

There is no reason to doubt that Jesus had such a vision (however the Gospels work the tradition differently), that he shared it with at least some disciples if not more, and that his earthly ministry starts there. Starts not with a task, with a call to do something, but with a relationship. It must have been growing for years, but now its depth brings him into union with God. "You are my son, my beloved." We are inseparably knit together. Your DNA bears my image. It is not your doing, it is mine, and you will always be close to me and precious, come what may.

I would bet my entire honorarium for this morning (of course there is none), that many of you have had such moments, such visions, such callings, that you heard or knew that you were "my beloved." A moment that broke through your many layers of resistance and perhaps a belief in your unworthiness, to surround you with the love of the universe. You may have heard it, or saw it, or just felt it, but it was there and it changed your life forever.

For me it was stimulated by a Bible study group early in my ministry when I had a lot of vocational angst. In an alone moment, clear as a bell I heard Jesus say, "Mel, why are you fighting me?" Blown away. Jesus has been among other things a brother ever since.

You may have read Mother Theresa's biography of a few years back. She had a deep sense of God's love from childhood, took her final vows as a nun in India in her 20's, teaching in her order's girls school in Calcutta. She formed what she called her "hidden vow," not to deny God

anything he would ask of her and lived that out for several years in India during the tumult of war and the crushing poverty of the city.

But it was on a train ride on September 10, 1946, when she had been directed to make a retreat up country, as she says, “It was in that train, I heard the call to give up all and follow Him into the slums—to serve him in the poorest of the poor...I knew It was His will and I had to follow Him. There was no doubt that it was going to be His work.”

An interesting sidelight—decades later she would lament that she never had another such experience of such intimacy with Christ. But it didn’t matter. As was true for her Lord, one visitation carried her for the rest of her life.

So it is all about relationship. Morality is important, but without the relationship of the heart you are still in the dry wilderness. Same with your kids. You may have your rules, but its unconditional love that makes it all work.

These days some people spend a lot of money to shamans or guides good and bad in order to induce a vision with a sense of union with all creation. Its been a growing market. St. Mark, though, gives a brush stroke to the picture to let us know that Jesus’ vision—and our baptismal activating visions—are not just for private consumption. He says Jesus “saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit came down,” echoing Isaiah 64: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...to make your name know to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence.” For a couple of centuries the Roman Empire trembled at Christian presence, enough to mount periodic persecutions. Today the Empire still co-opts us and hardly ever trembles.

Nor was it a private affair for Mother Theresa. She always believed that the purpose of her congregation (it is written in their Rule) was to satiate the thirst of Jesus, his broken body crying from the cross “I thirst.” Totally deprived of consolation, in abject poverty, despised and alone, Jesus calls out—for our love and sacrifice, she believed, which we can fulfill by serving the poorest of the poor. As her biographer noted, “Thirst...a painful longing for what is missing—became synonymous for her with particular aspects of God’s love for each person.”

For what do you thirst? In a few moments we will reaffirm our baptismal promises. As we go through them, notice if your thirst gets especially active on one in particular. Some of us kind of grow into a vision, following a long-term sense of vocational rightness for ourselves. Others of us, like St. Paul on the road to Damascus, need a spiritual two-by-four over the noggin to break through our resistance. Your baptism and its renewal should make you hungry and thirsty—for God’s righteousness and justice.

Which brings us back to John the Baptist, with a twist. We are no longer defined as sinner’s but as God’s beloved. We tear apart clouds of injustice so that the earth may be healed from the very bottom upward. It is a thirsty discomfort lodged in our soul, because we have been initiated into this community of the beloved.

Pray, brothers and sisters, that our thirsty love may grow and grow in the days and years to come.