

**Mark 1:4-11 (NRSV)**

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside 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 thong 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 on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

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Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Water. As I walked with this text the last couple of weeks, for some reason, the idea of water kept coming through to me.

Water is amazing. It is one of the very few substances that exists in nature in all three forms – gas as water vapor, liquid as liquid water, and solid, as water ice. Without water, life as we know it wouldn't be possible. We need water to dissolve all the chemicals that our bodies need to stay alive at a cellular level. We are, all of us, mostly water. For the first time in history, most people have access to drinkable water, but pollution and overpopulation are beginning to endanger access to water in the less developed world. Put simply, water makes life possible and without it, life is not possible.

And yet, anyone who remembers Hurricane Katrina breaking down the levees in New Orleans or Tropical Storm Ernesto knocking out power to Calvert County for a few days, or anyone who has ever had a near-drowning experience knows that too much water can be a very dangerous thing. Tsunamis, hurricanes and floods can be major catastrophes. Swimming pools, rough surf and bathtubs can be the stuff of personal tragedy. Water may make life possible, but it can also add danger and unpredictability to life.

It won't surprise you to know that ancient Israel had the same mixed feelings about water. Perched on the edge of the Mediterranean Sea, ancient Israel saw the sea as chaotic and dangerous. Look at the reading from Genesis – before God began the work of creation, all that existed were the waters, formless and void. The people of God relied on God to bring order and light to the chaotic darkness.

And yet, the Psalm describes God using the waters to demonstrate his majesty and power. The Psalm is describing a storm forming over the Mediterranean and then breaking over the land. The God of glory thunders over mighty waters. His thunderous voice breaks the cedars of Lebanon, makes the ground dance, skip like a calf. The cedars of Lebanon were the mightiest of trees, tall and majestic. Yet the storm can snap them just like that. The sky flashes forth flames and shakes the wilderness. This is a mighty God, not to be trifled with.

And yet, water and its dangers could not be avoided. Population centers were only possible where there was access to water. Jerusalem grew up around the Gihon spring that fed the pool of Siloam. The Sea of Galilee made agriculture and fishing possible. And the River Jordan brought the possibility of life to the wilderness.

Mark tells us that John the Baptist went out to the wilderness to proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. On one

hand, this is not surprising – most major religions use some kind of ritual washing for purposes of purification. Ancient Judaism, for example, uses bathing in a *mikvah* to return to ritual purity. Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam and Shinto all use bathing as part of rituals of purification.

On the other hand, what John is doing is really something very different and rather special. Most purification rituals are conducted by the person him or herself – you wash yourself in the special pool or special river or with a special soap or brush. But John does the baptizing. Why? And what does he do? In that early practice, John apparently immerses you in the river and brings you back up.

And just as we have mixed feelings about water – it brings life but it can also bring danger – so John, too, is an ambivalent figure, a fierce agent of a loving God, a wild, uncontrollable prophet and forerunner of the Prince of Peace.

And the baptism is ambivalent as well -- the sky is ripped apart, a scene of violence, like a storm. But in that moment, Heaven and Earth are joined, and you almost feel God's joy, taking Jesus' face in his hands and saying "You are my son, the beloved. I rejoice in you." In Matthew's Gospel the voice makes a public declaration – "This is my son, the Beloved, in him I am well pleased." But Mark's Gospel records an achingly private, personal moment between Jesus and God, between father and son.

I mentioned earlier that in a moment we'll be baptizing young Amelia Claire Piper, and part of me wishes I could recreate that moment for her, tear a hole in the sky and introduce her to God, who would surely love her, who would surely hold her face in his hands and say, "Amelia Claire, my beloved child. I rejoice in you." I'd like to be able to show that to her.

At the same time, letting God into your life is a dangerous thing. Believe me I know. Since God got into my life he's turned everything upside down. My weekends have gotten completely unpredictable, my time isn't my own, people expect me to be able to pray at the drop of a hat. I go to the library and all the homeless people know me and I know them and they're my friends. What a mess!

And you know it in your own lives, too. You have a whole new extended family to worry about, you feel guilty when you waste money on simple pleasures, you ask questions about things you used to be able to take for granted, you worry about homeless people and sick people and people who you don't even know and have never met.

And I think, well, Amelia Claire, it might be easier if we kept heaven and earth separate and left God on his side and us on ours. It might be easier and more predictable. Safer, more sensible. Let's leave well enough alone.

But, you know what? That's not really up to us. Our God refuses to be left out of our world, out of our calculations. Our God refuses to be domesticated, refuses to be broken to fit our needs. Our God loves us passionately, hopes for us fiercely, our God as we say, is a jealous God. And he is. It's a good thing that in our hearts we know that having God in our lives is what makes life worth living, that God in our lives shows us how we were intended to live, fully and fruitfully and completely.

It's no accident, I think, that water is such an integral part of baptism. Water gives life, but water is unpredictable, even a little dangerous. When we are baptized we suffer a little death. We die to a life that is under our control. We die to a life that is self-sufficient, a life that we can measure and order and count. But we are also given a new life, a life of meaning and purpose and beauty and community.

The central message of the baptism of Jesus is that God has torn down the barrier between heaven and earth, that God is loose in the world. That's the bad news, because with God loose in the world, life will be dangerous and unpredictable and surprising and beautiful. But that's the good news, too. Literally, the Good News, that's the Gospel. May God be praised!

Amen.