

Last Sunday Jill read some words for me about the meaning of Epiphany, which usually focuses on the story of the Magi-oi (Magi) or Three Wise Men as we call them. But Epiphany also often includes the story of Jesus being baptized. OK? That sounds harmless enough, right? Jesus doing a normally Christian thing sounds perfectly **normal**. But is it? Just for a promotional spot, in my Sunday School class today we will take a look at how all 4 of our NT Gospels deal with the Baptism of Jesus. And here is a preview: it must have been seen as awkward, or a little bit troubling, because all 4 of the Gospel stories deal with the baptism of Jesus in very different ways. One Gospel, the Gospel, John, deals with the story by getting rid of it entirely. In fact, John will tell us that Jesus was out there baptizing people just like John the Baptist.

Allow me to lay out this bit of information from people who know the original language and have spent their lives trying to understand this. Here is the information. The Gospel of Mark, which we have this morning, this story is seen as the prototype, the first one, the original. I believe whole-heartedly that it is the original. One reason why it is the first one is because when Matthew and then Luke retell the same story, they make it much longer. Stories never get shorter, they usually always get longer. Matthew and Luke are much longer than the Gospel of Mark, which is usually why Mark is often neglected.

So, this story that we are seeing right now, it is as I would hear as a boy, the real McCoy! So now, we can move into what happens here, and why it matters to us in any particular way.

First of all, Mark's story knows nothing of Christmas. Jesus comes into the story as a full-grown man, and the story actually starts out telling us about this man we call John the Baptist. Maybe question #1 to answer is *Who is this man, and what is he doing?* Again, this is something we usually take for granted or assume to be perfectly normal. And we have to remember that this story is the original of them all. The writer assumes that we know at least that there was this man called John the Baptizer. What about the special extra name? No one else is called "baptizer." What is this? Is this a normal Jewish thing back 2,000 years ago? Most all of the people in the story are in fact Jewish people from long ago, so we have to ask *Is this baptism thing something that was a normal Jewish thing?* The answer is No. By the way, the word **BAPTIDZOWN** is a Greek word that means to **plunge** under water. It does not mean just to stand there washing oneself. This word almost means doing a cannonball! You are going to get into the water, and forcefully so. This is why some Christians insist on baptism by immersion, which means dunking a person all the way under water, and not slowly, but quickly and profoundly.

OK. So we seem to have a man who is doing this water dunking to people. But why? That is a key thing. Mark describes this man by what he is wearing. And the description matches someone else, someone incredibly famous and important in the Bible, the man called Eliyahu, the one we call Elijah. By the way, what happens to Elijah? He is taken up into the sky. He does not die. Please know this: if you are in the

Bible, and you don't die, you are not off the hook. Elijah is expected to return, in fact Elijah is expected to return to prepare people to repent to be ready for the coming of Judgment Day and the coming of God!

Mark describes Elijah, except that this man is called John. He is preparing people for Judgment Day and the coming of God into the world. This is as serious as it can possibly be. And this Elijah figure tells of another one who is coming who will do greater things, and baptize with the power of God's own Spirit. Then, very quietly we are introduced to Jesus. We are told that he takes his turn like the others who are there. But when he comes up out of the water, all Heaven breaks loose, literally! We are not told that when anyone else is baptized that this happens; but for Jesus we are told abrupt, even loud jolting words. **And IMMEDIATELY when he came up from the water he saw the sky violently torn apart and he saw the Spirit like a dove coming down INTO him.** And then he is told privately by God "You are my beloved, my Son, and I am pleased."

We didn't see the next thing that was said, but it said this: **Mark 1:12** *And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.* Even this little sentence is abrupt. He doesn't get a gentle invitation. And he is not driven in a car, he is driven like he is being chased out! He gets chased out into the wilderness to spend some time being tempted by evil. When this time is finished he will begin his Ministry. He will tell people that the

Kairos, the right time has come, repent, God's Kingdom is on the way, believe this announcement of God, this Good News.

We could stop talking about this story right here, and probably be just fine. But the early Church seems to have struggled with a miniature elephant in the living room: why would Jesus need to get baptized? Why would Jesus need to repent? John the Baptist did what he did to prepare people for the coming of God's Kingdom! But he also talks a lot about how people need to repent of the sins they have done. Why would Jesus need to be baptized?

The other Gospels are actually going to struggle with this, and they will deal with it in different ways. But I am going to suggest this: Let's stick with this original story from Mark. And let's just assume that Jesus is operating under the same big picture as most other people would have done: he believes that God's Kingdom is coming soon. He believes that God's Judgment will be coming on the empires of men, and the evil that they have done. We don't know what Jesus knew about who he was, or what his potential mission might be. Could it be that Jesus went to be baptized, and had this experience that changed his life forever! When he is baptized, the sky tears open, God's own Spirit comes down from above and it actually goes into him. And then he gets the news: You are my beloved Son, and I am pleased. Now go do what I need you to do.

Maybe this baptism of Jesus is the day he gets his mission from God! Maybe this is the day when he finds out his identity, and that he is beloved by God, and that he is going to have some

serious days ahead. My goodness, what could have made him think that? Well, how about the sky being torn open? How about the Spirit penetrating into him and filling him? How about the Spirit driving him out into the desert to be tempted by evil? Jesus will have some serious days ahead. And we are going to talk about those days, all the way until the end of Holy Week, as we tell our great Christian story once again. We started on the First Sunday in Advent. We are making our way through the story again. We've a story to tell to the Nations, to the people who are far from God. Let's learn our story so that we can share it. In the name of Jesus, our brother, and God's beloved. AMEN.