

“A Most Unusual Baptism” – Mark 1:9-11

As we saw last week, Mark begins his Gospel with the ministry of John the Baptist. John was a relative of Jesus, probably a cousin. When Mary found that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit, she ran off to tell her relative Elizabeth. Remember how John leapt in his mother’s womb when Mary showed up? And then Elizabeth prophesied of Jesus’ ministry:

Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord." (Luke 1:42-45)

So, John grew and became the “voice of one crying in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord” and he engaged in a ministry of baptism. It was a baptism of repentance. He exhorted people to confess their sins and demonstrate their repentance by submitting to baptism in the Jordan River. But that baptism couldn’t save anyone. He was pointing the way to the true Messiah, who would baptize not with water, but with the Holy Spirit.

So, as we pick up the account this morning, John is at the height of his ministry and the height of his popularity and he is going to be asked to perform a most unusual baptism. Jesus, the sinless One, came to John to be baptized. This confused the dickens out of John the Baptist.

And John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?" (Matthew 3:14)

Jesus never sinned, so Jesus had nothing to repent of. What’s up with this? We read Jesus response in the Gospel of Matthew:

But Jesus answered and said to him, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he allowed Him. (Matthew 3:15)

You see, sometimes we need to go to the other Gospel’s because Mark is so concise. He leaves out a lot of detail. Joe Friday would have loved this. It is “just the facts, ma’am.” But let’s now look into this most unusual baptism.

It came to pass in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And immediately, coming up from the water, He saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove. Then a voice came from heaven, "You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Mark 1:9-11)

Before we get into the Baptism itself, we really need to spend a few minutes with that very first phrase. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, just as predicted, but he was raised in Galilee, in a little town called Nazareth and he spent most of the first 30 years of His life in Galilee. It’s why Mark says *Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee*. That’s actually quite remarkable and totally unexpected, at least it was to all the Jewish scholars of the day. They did not expect Messiah to come from that backwater town up north. From their perspective, Messiah should come from Jerusalem, because that’s where all the important people lived. You see, according to their culture, the farther you were from Jerusalem, the less important you were. Galilee was a long way from Jerusalem and after the Assyrians took the Northern ten tribes into captivity, a bunch of Gentiles moved in. Much of the population was made up of folks who couldn’t possibly trace their lineage to Abraham.

But isn't that just like God? God has little regard for the things that humans seem to esteem.

For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence. (1 Corinthians 1:26-29)

Now, it shouldn't have been a surprise that Jesus would come out of Galilee, because their Scriptures, that is our Old Testament, clearly predicted it. We opened our worship service with one of the most explicit prophecies from Isaiah, Chapter 9:

*By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, In **Galilee of the Gentiles**. The people who walked in darkness Have seen a great light; Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, Upon them a light has shined. (Isaiah 9:1-2)*

Notice the phrase "*Galilee of the Gentiles*"? Because of their prejudice, the Jewish elite simply wouldn't be confused by the facts. They considered all Galileans to be uneducated, unwashed, second-class citizens and Gentile Galileans were considered the scum of the earth. In fact, to be called a Galilean was a serious insult. Do you remember what they said to Nicodemus when he tried to come to Jesus' defense?

They answered and said to him, "Are you also from Galilee? Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee." (John 7:52)

Oh really? What about Jonah? Or perhaps even Hosea and Nahum? Their prejudice was so severe that they actually ignored Scripture they considered to be most holy. I'm a little surprised Nicodemus didn't shoot them down! They were so beside themselves with jealousy that they probably didn't even know they were spouting lies.

Anyway, it was surprising enough that Messiah would show up from Galilee. But not only that, He also came out of that backwater nowhere place called Nazareth. Apparently, even Galileans didn't think much of Nazareth. Remember what Nathaniel said?

Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." And Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:45-46)

Jesus came to identify with the very least of us. You might not think you are very important in the grand scheme of things, but Jesus thinks you're important. And when He entered His creation as a human being, he didn't show up in regal robes, announced with fanfare, hanging out with the religious and political elite. He was a carpenter ... a working stiff. He identifies with you.

Jesus showed up and asked to be baptized by John and John didn't get it. He didn't understand why the Sinless One would submit to a baptism of repentance. That's confused a fair number of folks today, too. Jesus had an answer for him and for us. He said, "*Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.*"

Great; what does that mean? Well, for starters, it means that it was right for John to baptize Jesus. But why? Because Jesus was about to begin His public ministry and for

three and a half years, He would be making His way to the cross. This was a public declaration. He had no sin of His own, but He was going to bear the sins of many. He would bear the sins of everyone who would believe.

For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

By His baptism, Jesus was saying “I know I have no sin of my own, so I have no need to repent. But I am going to identify with you in every way, so that I can take your sin upon Myself.” John baptized Jesus because it was right to do so. John’s ministry was to baptize and proclaim. So, together, John and Jesus fulfilled all righteousness.

And if there was any doubt that this was an appropriate thing to do, God Almighty put that to rest in a spectacular way.

And immediately, coming up from the water, He saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove. (Mark 1:10)

John really likes that word “immediately”. It’s *eutheōs* (εὐθέως) in the Greek, and we’re going to see a lot of it. But there’s another Greek word in this verse that I find really interesting. It’s translated “parting” in our New King James. It is *schizō* (σχίζω). It literally means to “rip apart” or to “rend”. It’s the verb that’s used when the Temple veil was torn from top to bottom at the time of Jesus’ death. So, to me, “parting” just seems too passive, too nice. God ripped the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descended onto the Son of Man. This was a dramatic event!

Oh, and by the way, the Holy Spirit doesn’t look like a dove. I know you can get Bible covers and Bibles with doves on them. You can get dove stickers for your car’s back window. You can get beautiful greeting cards and sometimes bulletin covers with doves on them. One of my old journals has a stylized image of a dove on the cover. And some denominations use a dove in their logo. But that’s not what the Holy Spirit looks like. He is Spirit!

This passage says He descended like a dove. How does a dove descend? Gently. We have several pairs of mourning doves in our neighborhood. I enjoy watching them and I love their call. When they descend to land on the ground, it is a gentle descent. Contrast a dove’s descent with that of a bird of prey, like a hawk. That’s all its saying. In theory, Duane “the Rock” Johnson could descend like a dove if he had the right kind of parachute!

Now, I’ll admit, God the Holy Spirit certainly could have taken the form of a dove in this instance. He’s God; He can do anything He wants. In Luke’s Gospel, we read:

And the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him, and a voice came from heaven which said, "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased." (Luke 3:22)

So, the Holy Spirit manifested Himself in some sort of bodily form. Perhaps it was a dove. An awful lot of commentators think so. I’ve heard it said that a dove represents the purity, gentleness, peacefulness, and graciousness of the Holy Spirit. But the language doesn’t require that He took the actual form of a dove. Like a dove describes the descent, not the bodily form.

I hope that doesn’t mess with your theological tradition too much. I’ve probably made too big a deal of it. Just be careful you’re not making God the Spirit into a graven image that you inadvertently bow down to. God doesn’t like that sort of thing.

Here’s the thing:

No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him. (John 1:18)

Jesus is the revelation of Almighty God to us. Not a dove. He is the one Mediator between God and man and Jesus is all you need.

He is the brightness of [God's] glory and the express image of His person, (Hebrews 1:3)

God the Son emptied Himself of the attributes of Godhood so He could live a human life so that He could identify with us. For example, when He walked this Earth, he was no longer omnipresent; He was not everywhere at once. He was isolated in one place. Everything that He did, He did by the power of the Holy Spirit.

This baptism was an ordination. It was a real, visible event that launched Jesus into His public ministry. John saw the Spirit descending. Those who were present witnessed it too and they also witnessed the audible testimony of Almighty God.

Then a voice came from heaven, "You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Mark 1:11)

As Jesus emerged from the Jordan, the entire Godhead was made manifest, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. One God, in three Persons. Distinct, yet perfectly one. This is the Trinity on display.

It was a most unusual baptism!

Why is this important to us? It is important because it validates Jesus' earthly ministry. That's what an ordination is. When someone is ordained into the ministry, the credentialing organization is saying that his ministry is valid. Jesus' ordination committee is Almighty God Himself.

But there is something far more important to you. Do you believe Jesus ministry is valid? Do you believe He accomplished what He set out to do on your behalf?

You are a sinner and God hates sin. I'm a sinner too.

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (Romans 3:23)

In God's justice system, sin is a capital offense.

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

Jesus came to Earth to live a perfect, sinless, human life. He identified with you and with me. He identified with the least of us and then He took that perfect life to the cross to pay the penalty for your sins and mine, because He loves us. Because He loves you!

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

Jesus wasn't baptized to symbolize cleansing from His own sins; He didn't have any. He was baptized to identify with you and your sins.

All you have to do is believe. That's the work of God, to believe in the One He sent. (John 6:29) If you confess with your mouth: "Jesus, You are my Lord." And if you believe in your heart that Jesus has risen from the dead and is alive right now, the Bible says you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)

Jesus identified with you. He is Emmanuel – God with us. Have you identified with Him? I so pray that you have.