

Mark 1:4-11 (NRSV)

<sup>4</sup> John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

<sup>9</sup> In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

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Well last week we spoke about the transition or change in leadership between Moses and Joshua ... Moses standing on the brink of the Promised Land but not leading the Nation of Israel into it. For there was a change needed. Though Moses was invaluable for the growth and development of his ragtag group of refugees into a nation --- yet he was the leader to take them there --- but not lead them once

there. Moses was the leader to help prepare the way for that nation to rise and prosper in the Promised Land.

Well in today's passage we have a similar transition. In these opening verses of Mark's Gospel we are introduced to John the Baptist. A man who like Moses, played out his role in the wilderness. For just as Moses was helping prepare the Children of Israel into a nation ... so John the Baptist is the preparing those same Children of Israel for the coming of their Messiah. A man who had no delusions about his role ... he was not the One ... no ... One was coming who was far greater than he. John's role was to point to that One. And of course that One we know was Jesus of Nazareth ... Jesus the Christ. The One who was to lead all of God's Children into the Promised Land ... the Promised Land of salvation, of peace, of reconciliation, of love.

Now Mark's Gospel, more than any of the others, focuses our attention on this preparatory work of John. Matthew and especially Luke begin their Gospels with genealogies of Christ and elaborate nativity stories relaying the miraculous nature of His birth. And John, of course, takes a completely different approach and gives us the `Logos` beginning ... in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

But Mark is completely different as he begins his Gospel with John the Baptist.

First by paraphrasing passages from two ancient prophets --- Malachi – ``See I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way`` (3:1) and Isaiah – ``the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight`` (40:3). The promises of God to send a messenger before He sends our Redeemer.

And then this – our passage today. A description of that messenger – John the Baptist. A man travelling the wilderness of the Judean countryside --- calling all who will listen to a baptism of the repentance of sins and speaking of the Greater One yet to come. For John the Baptist stands in the same tradition as those ancient prophets – Isaiah and Malachi – as he cries out and reminds the people of God`s promise of redemption ... of God`s promise of a redeemer. In this brief introduction Mark has reminded his audience of the ancient promises of God and also presented a picture of his present ... when a man was wandering through the wilderness preparing a people for the fruition of those Promises... the arrival of that redeemer.

And then we find that redeemer entering the narrative ... not as a child in swaddling clothes ... but as a man ready to embark on his Ministry of redemption.

And this passage --- his baptism --- is the beginning point of that ministry. This is the beginning of the fulfilment of God`s ancient promises. A momentous event defined by the rentng of heaven – that which was sealed is `torn apart` - heavens itself is flung open as Jesus comes up out of the waters of Baptism. And from that opened heaven comes a voice - `You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased`.

But there is something else significantly different in this account as presented by Mark ... and that is the fact that it seems that these momentous signs are seen by Jesus and Jesus alone. We are told HE saw the rentng of heaven that HE heard the voice speaking. These were manifestations – epiphanies - witnessed by him alone. We are not told of anyone else`s response ... indeed we are not even told if John himself recognizes who it is he is baptizing ... the very One whose way he was to prepare.

And this is a theme that continues on throughout Mark. The gradual revelation of the true nature of this Jesus of Nazareth who is indeed the Christ ... the Messiah ... the very Son of God. It is not until after his death on the cross ... after other momentous signs such as the tearing open of the Holy of Holies in the Temple ... do we hear a public affirmation of who Christ is ... and that comes from the lips of

an anonymous centurion ... ``Truly this man was God`s son``. For that is the moment that people realized the truth of what Jesus himself heard at his baptism. He is named by God as his son and it is true. Following his baptism this truth was manifested more and more clearly. As he lived out his life ... and more importantly lived out God`s will.

Now we too have also undergone a baptism, just as Jesus did. And no, ours was not witnessed by a rending of heaven and a voice of proclamation. But nonetheless our baptism echoed that of Jesus`. For it was on that occasion that we were named by God as his own. That is our understanding of Baptism – that it is the process by which we enter into a community ... the community of the Body of Christ. And it is the beginning of our life as a Christian... as we clothe ourselves in that name. Christian ... literally `little Christ`.

Just as for Christ, our baptism is just the beginning of a process. There is an intimacy in that moment of Baptism ... between ourselves and God. A wondrous moment when God claims us as his ... and we claim Him as ours. But that is a deeply personal and heart-felt moment. Certainly the baptism service is witnessed by those gathered ... but who truly can see into our souls other than our God? Who but he can see as we open ourselves to his will in our lives?

Mapleton Jan 11 2009

And thus it is the beginning of that process ... as each of us struggles to live out the truth of our identity as beloved children of God. And it is a struggle ... and it can be a process that is even painful at times. But it is what we are called to do. It is who we are created to be. Echoes of Christ made manifest. Little Christs who reflect his love, his compassion, his humility, his grace in our lives in our world. This is the great task that is set before us ... to live out God`s will in our lives... live out our destiny as His Children ... His beloved.