

Awaiting the Unexpected: Disturbing Peaceⁱ

Mark 1: 1 – 8

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I.

In 2001, on the eve of start of the war in Afghanistan,ⁱⁱ I was standing waist-deep in a baptistry.

It was my first time officiating an immersion baptism.

The person being baptized was a teenager.

His family came from a church background that believed in baptism by full immersion.

Our feelings of anticipation were mixed that evening.

On the one hand we were a people celebrating a Baptism.

On the other hand, were a people traumatized by the still fresh experiences of 9-11, citizens of country on the brink of war.

II.

The writer known as Mark lived near Jerusalem during a time of war.

In the middle of a situation of intense conflict, he invented a new form of literature called Gospel, or, in Greek, *euangeliou*.

Prior to Mark's use of the word, *euangeliou* was a term associated with the announcement of a military victory.ⁱⁱⁱ

But Mark used the word to tell a story about one he called Son of God.

Which was a pretty audacious thing to do because in the Roman Empire, there was only one Son of God, and that was the Emperor, Caesar.

But Mark, in writing his gospel, was telling a story about a different kind of victory, a victory of love over hate;

a victory of servanthood over domination;

a victory of peace over war;

but not just any peace, not simply peace as the absence of conflict, but peace as the presence of justice and communal well-being.

Mark's Gospel was about a disturbing peace that disrupted the status quo.

And this disturbing peace was ushered in by a different kind of leader, a disturber of the peace sent to show people the way of active nonviolence.

And the one of whom Mark spoke was not just another in a long line of leaders.

Mark's story was the Gospel of Jesus, the one true Son of God.

The very first nativity story belongs not to Matthew, nor to Luke, but to Mark, who wrote his Gospel first.

But Mark's nativity story doesn't mention angels or shepherds or miraculous signs; in fact, it doesn't even mention his parents.

For Mark, the Gospel is born in the wilderness.

And the Gospel doesn't begin with ideas or propositions or portents in the sky.

The Gospel begins with a person, the least cuddly and cute person you could imagine.

His name was John, and he wore strange clothes and ate strange food and said strange things.

Mark quotes the prophet Isaiah to describe John as a "voice crying in the wilderness" to "prepare a way for the coming of the Lord."

Attached to the person of John is an action.

It's so closely attached, we think it's part of his name.

John is a baptizer.

In the desert wilderness of the Jordan River Valley, John offers baptism to all who would receive it.

People come from all over the Judean countryside, even from as far away as Jerusalem, to be baptized by John in the Jordan.

(I'm always afraid that I'm going to mix that up and say baptized by Jordan in the John.)

What is this baptism John is offering, and why are we talking about it during Advent?

Mark calls it a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin.

Normally reserved for recent converts to Judaism, the baptism John offers is for everyone.

This baptism marks a change of mind called "repentance."

Literally meaning to turn aside or turn around, repentance means a decision to look again.

A baptism of repentance is about entering an alternative frame of mind, one that is open to new possibilities, specifically, the possibility of following God more nearly and clearly, more freely and faithfully.

The act of repentance is connected to the forgiveness of sins.

We don't like to talk about sins much in liberal mainline Christianity.

We tend to think it sounds too negative and judgmental and that we should focus on more positive and pro-active things.

But sins are not so much bad things we do, but a way to describe human nature which, if we're honest, seems to be perpetually bent on going its own way and

ignoring what it means to belong, first and foremost, to the one who gives us life and calls us good.

Sin means "going our own way."

Sin means from separated from God.

If sin is separation from God, forgiveness is God's act of overcoming that separation.

The English word forgiveness suggests that God overcomes separation by giving the gift of God's loving acceptance before we even know to ask for it.

I've since forgotten the source, but I once heard someone suggest that an Assurance of God's love should precede a Prayer of Confession. Otherwise, we might otherwise think that we earn God's forgiveness by confessing our sins when in fact it works the other way around.

The assurance we receive is always already on offer before we confess.

And so it is with the baptism offered by John.

It is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

When one rises from the waters of baptism, they have earned nothing new, but have been immersed in the forgiving love on offer from the beginning.

III.

All of the Gospel writers wrestle with the fact that Jesus comes to be baptized by John.

After all, why would Jesus Christ, the Son of God, need to repent or be forgiven? In Matthew, John and Jesus argue about it for a little while till John finally gives in.

Luke includes it as a kind of footnote: O, and Jesus was baptized too.

And John makes no mention of Jesus being baptized.

But in Mark, Jesus' baptism just happens, like the most normal thing ever.

In fact, Jesus' baptism is his nativity.

This is where Jesus Christ, Son of God, is born.

In Jesus' baptism, God holds nothing back.

Jesus Baptism is the act of incarnation.

In the person of Jesus, God becomes immersed into humanity.

Which is why we're talking about Baptism during Advent.

And it is also why the church practices baptism today.

In Baptism, we join Christ under the waters, we join him in his death and in his rising.

In Baptism, God becomes incarnated in us and we become fully immersed in our God-given humanity.

IV.

I have the suspicion that most Christians don't realize the radical nature of their own Baptism.

The most shocking, and true, description of Baptism I've come across is in a sermon by Stanley Saunders.^{iv}

On the occasion of his infant son's baptism, Saunders acknowledges what baptism means, namely, that my son will be put to death.

In this baptism he dies to world, not metaphorically, but really.

He dies to consumerism and greed, to bigotry and hate, to violence and death.

In this Baptism he no longer belongs to us, though we are still entrusted with his care.

Once baptized, he belongs to Christ, has taken Christ's name and Christ's identity, and has died to everything else, even his parents.

As a minister, people who have no connection to the church, and no interest in participating in the life of the church, sometimes come to me to have their baby baptized.

In those cases, I want to offer a warning.

"Are you sure you want to do this? This baptism means that your baby will have a new name and a new identity, and that new identity will not always conform to who you think your child is."

I usually find something more gracious to say, like, why don't you come to worship for a couple of weeks and see if this community is a place where you think your child will find Christian nurture.

Two practices that are part of the baptismal liturgy highlight to importance of naming and identity.

The first practice to withhold the baptizee's name until the moment of baptism.

Baptism is a naming ceremony, not only repeating the name given by parents and guardians, but the naming of the baptized as "child of God," "beloved," and "source of joy."

This naming preempts every other name someone will be called in their life.

The second practice is using the person's first and middle name and leaving off their surname.

It's as if, through Baptism, we're all given the same last name: Christ.

Through baptism, a person, or their parents, gives up ultimate claim over their life.

They no longer belong to themselves alone, or to their family, but to Christ's body.

In this sense, through Baptism, we are all adopted, every single one of us.

That is our new identity as we die to one life and are born to another.

V.

On that October day 19 years ago, the teenager and I stepped into the still water of the baptistry.

It was lukewarm but comfortable enough.

The people gathered shared prayers, songs, words of encouragement. As we spoke the liturgy, God's Spirit settled into the room, into our unsettled lives, into the water, into the life of this teenager who would go on to become a United States Marine.

There is a legend that Crusaders in the Middle Ages would leave their sword had out of the water when baptized as a way of exempting their slaughter from the claim of the nonviolent Christ.

But I can tell you, I was there that day, and the soon to become Marine went all the way under, died with Christ, and came all the way up, rising with Christ.

I'm not certain what difference his Baptism made in his life, whether the disturbing peace of Christ won out over the inevitable war of Empire.

But that day we called him "child of God," "Beloved," and "Source of Joy," not because we thought so, which we did, but because God thinks so.

And we witnessed his adoption into a new family, Christ's body, which bears the marks of war and violence and yet continues to be a faithful source of God's love.

Every time we remember our own Baptism, we die again, and then rise again.

The former peace is disturbed, we remember who we are, we turn back from separation and join the common humanity God created when God looked at humans, loved them, all of them, and became them in Jesus Christ, Son of God. Amen.

ⁱ Thanks to Dr. Sharon Fennema who created our 2020 Advent liturgy, including the words in the title of this sermon.

ⁱⁱ The War in Afghanistan, the longest war in United States' history, began on October 7, 2001 and continues still, costing over \$2 Trillion to date.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thanks to the SaltProject blog for this insight.

^{iv} Stanley Saunders's sermon is found in a book by Charles Campbell and Stanley Saunders called "Word on the Street: Performing the Word in the Urban Context" (2000).