

Sermon: A New Beginning

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

7 January 2024

Based on **Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11**

Here we are, on the first Sunday in a new year, which is always a good time to look back to see how we did, and to look forward to what's next. It feels like a new beginning even if we are just continuing on from where we were in December. At least Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany are in our collective rear-view mirror.

Early in December, during Advent, we said, 'We're in a time of new beginnings, even in the places where the ground is uneven and rough.'

Now, in early January, we're still talking about new beginnings, this time the kind represented by baptism, which is what today's readings are all about.

In 1982, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches published Faith and Order Paper No. 111, titled *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. It was the culmination of a process of study that stretched way back to the first Faith and Order Conference at Lausanne, Switzerland in 1927. It is an informative little book.

And though the Commission achieved a remarkable level of agreement after all that time and effort, they could not reach a consensus view on any of the three topics, and probably never will. Instead, what Faith and Order Paper No. 111 presents is an ecumenical view on what all churches can agree on, which is good news for us, because we have enough to deal with as it is.

The gist of our two readings is that the baptism given by John was different than Jesus' baptism. Mark says as much. Later, Paul realized how badly the early Christ followers misunderstood both.

John proclaimed a baptism of moral repentance. All the people of Jerusalem came to him, responding to his call to a literal change of heart. Meanwhile, a lone individual from a backwater town in Galilee arrived on the scene too.

From what Mark has already told us, it would seem that God was no longer safely in heaven, but was on the loose among us, and that the time of waiting was over.

John wanted to give the people a messianic consciousness, an awareness, but not through a religious conversion; they were already Jewish, but they were unprepared. That was his job.

And then, against the backdrop of social conflict and upheaval and foreign oppression, Jesus from Nazareth was baptized by John.

When he came up out of the water, Jesus alone saw the heavens violently torn apart – the Greek word used by Mark was *schizō* – and he saw the Spirit descending like a very powerful dove upon him.

The way it's written, no one else heard or saw any of this, in keeping with the secret Messiah motif in both Mark and Matthew. Nevertheless, Mark somehow heard about it and wrote it down at some point.

Thus, Jesus, David's heir 'in a world gone deeply awry,'¹ was commissioned by God and the Holy Spirit as the anointed king of Israel in the same moment he became like one of us in his baptism. And this is where the later misunderstanding comes in.

If early Christian baptism was an initiation into the church, which is how we see it today, then it was the first step to following Jesus and we would like to get it right, or at least to have some understanding of what it is.

In Acts, the verses immediately before today's passage provide good context so, very briefly, Apollos, Paul's co-worker from Alexandria, apparently did not rightly understand baptism and how it enabled entry into the Jesus movement.

Apollos taught the Christians in Ephesus about John's baptism, which involved repentance and the cleansing ritual of water. He did not teach about the Holy Spirit. We can say that his knowledge was accurate but incomplete.

We know the Paul's disciples in Ephesus were Gentiles because they had never heard of the Holy Spirit, about which any Jew could tell you. But in terms of baptism, the Spirit's involvement is *the* motivating factor in how we live our lives in Christ.

The disciples in Ephesus immediately came forward to be baptized in Jesus' name, and, in a ritual of consecration and appointment, like the one used at a pastor's ordination, Paul laid hands on them. This proved two things. One, that Paul had the authority to do it, and, by that action, the Holy Spirit, the missing piece, came upon them.

For most of us, life is a continuing struggle to varying degrees, yet it is also a continuing experience of grace. Baptism is God's gift of the Spirit, a gift of grace that we get once and carry with us always.

The Holy Spirit and God's grace can come to us even when we think all is lost.

Europeans typically call World War II the Second World War because they called the first one the Great War in sort of a romanticized way. They started calling it the First World War only after the second one started.

Anyway, in Nazi Germany, all Jews carried identification cards with a large 'J' stamped on them to separate them from the non-Jewish population. A woman named Ingund Lore Lewinsky and her parents evaded deportation by hiding in a small, unheated hut in the woods outside Berlin. They buried their papers nearby. They lived in the woods for two years with very little food and the constant fear of being caught.

You needn't be a Christian to experience God's grace. They survived and after liberation, they dug up their papers and started over, making a new beginning in the United States in 1946. Surviving in the woods was their baptism.

These days, baptism in many denominations is merely a check-list item; it's what you do, like Mary and Joseph presenting Jesus at the Temple last week.

In other denominations, infant v. adult baptism remains a hot topic of debate. You can choose full immersion or a simple sprinkle of water on the forehead, but which is more Scripturally accurate? Another problem: how do I *know* that the Holy Spirit came upon me at my baptism? I was just a baby.

Does any of it matter to God or is baptism just another human doctrine?

The Rev. DeWitt Talmage, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in New York at the turn of the last century, criticized debates about baptism and called it 'ecclesiastical hydropathy.' The only result, he said, was blurred vision – so, full immersion for them.

Then again, Jesus did it.

If we re-evaluate and reflect on what baptism means for us and what we expect from it, we might enrich and deepen our faith life.

Jesus is from Nazareth, and he is also the Son of God, two realities that Mark never bothered to explain to those hearing the story for the first time.

Some mysteries don't need to be solved.

Baptism, in whatever way we achieve it, represents new life. God's gift of the Spirit is central in both readings. It's a universal gift, and it is a gift for *us*, if we want it.

God tore open the heavens and cleared the way for us to begin again with a clean slate and to stand in God's grace and steadfast love. That's what God wants and that's all we need to know.

Amen.

* * * * *

¹ Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, 1989), 115.