

“A New Day”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Baptism of the Lord – January 8, 2012

Mark 1: 4-11

Genesis 1: 1-5

John stood there in the woods, by the banks of the Jordan. He was dressed in the skin of a camel, and ate what he found in the wilderness. His birth was proclaimed by an angel to his father, Zechariah. He was sent by God, and as such he was very special. But he was not “the one.”

“That one” would come after John, and John’s job was to prepare – to prepare the way for “the one” to come and bring about God’s salvation to the world. John’s calling was to teach, to preach, and to engage the people who came to him, so they might be ready. John was there in the wilderness so that the people would follow another out of their wildernesses.

“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. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:7-8). This is how John introduces Jesus. For all who thought he was “the one,” he quickly and swiftly corrects them. And it’s not only in his words, but in his actions. Mark puts it fairly simply: “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan” (1:9). He not only confesses his faith, he exhibits it in baptizing the Son of God.

Clayton Schmit reflects on the Baptism of the Lord in this way: *January is the New Year’s genesis. It is marked by people resolving to live new lives according to new habits. There is a kind of confession that begins the New Year because resolutions are a way of admitting that we have not been the kind of people we want to be. We confess that we are not as slender, cheerful, thankful, or productive as we would like to be. We admit to our humanness and commit to doing better. These are ordinary mortal confessions; usually not spiritually motivated, nor spiritually empowered. They are signs of people wanting to do their best to turn their lives around. But when the weeks speed by and ordinary life is resumed, old habits tend to reassert themselves. Come next January, the same resolutions are often made anew with plenty of hope, but no greater chance for success.*

The baptism of John was similar to people making resolutions, though it was certainly a more spiritual exercise. John preached repentance and had remarkable success. People were drawn to his watery chancel from the city and the countryside. At the river, he dunked them as a sign of people’s resolution to turn from their sins and back to the worship and service of God. But, John knew that there was a tentative quality to his work. He proclaimed that the one who came after him would baptize with something greater than water. He would baptize people with the Spirit of God.

The Spirit of God represented something far more powerful than human resolve. It was this Spirit that first moved over the waters at creation and brought form to the chaos of the birthing universe. When Jesus rose from the river, this

Spirit descended “upon him like a dove.” In this Spirit, Jesus did the powerful deeds that marked his remarkable ministry (Clayton J. Schmit, *Pulpit Resource*, January-March 2006, 10-11).

Paul speaks of baptism in terms of death and life: death to the old way of sin, and birth into a new life of hope. In Romans, Paul says, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3-4).

For me, this echoes the first chapter of Genesis we have read this morning. Before the world was created, “the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep.” The world was void of life. But then, “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” And that breath of the Spirit was present throughout the creation of night and day, earth and water, and all living creatures. God created life out of nothing; a new day in God’s eyes. “And God saw that it was good.”

A Presbyterian pastor writes: *Karl Barth referred to Jesus’ baptism as a “summary of the essence of the gospel.” The astounding epiphany, dramatized by the heavens opening and the Spirit descending as a dove, lies in the revelation that God is no longer hidden in the heavens but has become incarnate in the person of Jesus. All we need to know about God is now knowable in the character, purpose and grace of Jesus.*

However one interprets the Jordan River account, the transformative words are, “You are my beloved son in whom I am well pleased,” arguably the most coveted words in human language. On the human level, they’re heard as an affirmation of acceptance, pride and approval from a parent to a child. However, when Mark’s account of Jesus’ baptism is read through the eyes of Paul in Galatians, the words take on a significantly broader meaning. Lamar Williamson says that while the epiphany establishes Jesus’ identity as the Son of God, it also establishes our identity as God’s adoptive sons and daughters. It is precisely at times when we feel our own unworthiness that the text speaks to each of us. Without presuming divine identity with Jesus, we can affirm that we are all in our own unique and different ways children of God and joint heirs of God’s promise of unconditional grace. The text is a blessed assurance as well as a mandate for living our lives as brothers and sisters to all who need the good news (P.C. Ennis, *Christian Century*, December 27, 2011, 21).

In God’s Spirit, we are new creatures by water and the Spirit. The waters of baptism wash away our selfishness, our need to be in control, and our pride in needing to take care of ourselves. Jesus took all that on for us, and through his baptism frees us to follow him fully and completely. The waters rush over us and envelope all our desires to fix ourselves, and infuse the Spirit to fix us wholly and completely.

On this day when we celebrate Jesus’ baptism, may we all claim the promise we have been made by God: that nothing in life or in death will separate us from God’s love in Jesus Christ. And may we live each day as a new day in God’s good creation, knowing that we are loved unconditionally by a parent who meets us in human flesh in the form of his son.

Thanks be to God. Amen.