

“Eternally Marked”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
Baptism of the Lord – January 11, 2015

**Mark 1: 4-11**

One of the things that brings me renewed energy and joy as a pastor is teaching the confirmation class. Over the last few years, we have seen at least 15 of our young adults walk the journey of confirmation alongside their adult mentors. It is a journey of deepening faith and understanding what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ as a full, active member of the church. Why do we call it “confirmation”? Because it is the confirming of our baptismal vows, which were made by our parents and families when we were infants. If one of the youth has not been previously baptized, then they are invited to receive the sacrament when they join the church.

This year there are two young people going through confirmation – Amber Judy and Heather Mansell – and their adult mentors – Ross Estabrook and Amy Winton. Last Sunday, we spent our time talking about the sacraments: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. We spoke of how John Calvin referred to the sacraments as “visible signs of God’s invisible grace.” When we celebrate these as a part of our worship, we remember these acts of Jesus himself, and in doing so we recognize that God is present in a real, tangible way.

Lisa and I asked the group to reflect on memories about either their own baptisms, or the baptisms of their children. Heather and Amber were baptized as either infants or young children, so they have had to rely on memories shared with them by family and friends. I was privileged to baptize Amber, and my father, Heather’s grandfather, baptized Heather at the church I served in Charlotte, North Carolina. Ross reflected that each of his three daughters were baptized by three different ministers – all here at John Knox! Hannah was baptized by Dr. Dean; Claire was baptized by Rev. Merrill, and I baptized Sophie. I shared with the group that I have been told that I cried throughout my baptism as a baby, apparently because I didn’t have shoes and socks on – at least that’s what my mother has said!

There are memories we have or have been shared with us regarding our own baptism, or of the baptism of loved ones. If we haven’t been baptized, we have witnessed others receiving the sacrament at some point in worship. So, what’s happening when the waters are placed on our head in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? What does it signify for us as individual disciples? How are we eternally marked by this visible sign of God’s invisible grace?

One of the things we talked about last Sunday in confirmation class was about how and when the sacrament is administered. In our church, it is most often by sprinkling water on the head, whether the person is a baby, child, or adult. That is not the only way baptism can be administered in the Presbyterian Church – in fact, sprinkling or immersion is permissible. And we believe that baptism is available to all, no matter the age of the person. That is why we bring babies and children to the font, as well as adults.

Of course, there are churches that have different beliefs in regard to how and when baptism takes place. Some believe that only by immersion is baptism rightly administered, since that was how Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan. Some believe that only when we are youth or adults should baptism be administered, so that the person is fully aware of what is going on.

As I shared with the confirmation class, what matters most, in my opinion, is not at what age someone is baptized or the specifics of how the waters are given, but rather our understanding of what is happening when the sacrament takes place. When Jesus comes to John the Baptist in our passage from Mark today, he is turning himself over to God, just as John calls on those whom he had been baptizing previously. Jesus humbles himself, seeks God's blessing, and is marked forever with the Spirit's descent upon him. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

When we are baptized, or when we witness a baptism, we are reminded that we have been granted a new life in Jesus Christ. We have been eternally marked as God's Beloved. The waters represent washing away our old life of sin, and being made clean for a new life of service to God. It matters not at what age or by what means the waters wash over us. What matters most is that we trust in God's presence at that moment, a moment that lasts a lifetime.

Which brings me to the second observation I had, and that is: Once the waters have been poured over our heads, we are forever and eternally marked as a child of God. It does not matter whether we attend church our entire lives, or never attend church again after that day of our baptism. It does not matter whether we are the most active disciple in the congregation, whether we come only once or twice a year, or whether our attendance falls somewhere in-between. It does not matter whether we agree or disagree with decisions made, theology interpreted, or actions taken. When those waters touch our skin, God's Spirit is present, and is claiming each of us as his very own child – his beloved. And we profess that theology of baptism at the time of a funeral, when we say: "We thank you, O God, for your servant, whose baptism is now complete in death."

These baptismal waters mark us for a life of service, service that does not necessarily promise to be smooth and easy. Diane Roth is a

Lutheran pastor, and in her church, they, too, primarily administer baptism by sprinkling water on the person's head. But when she considers someone being baptized at a river, she wonders if there are lessons there we need to consider as to baptism's deeper meaning.

She writes: When Jesus is baptized, God tears apart the heavens, and a voice declares the truth of Jesus' identity: "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." But at his river baptism Jesus is given not just an identity, but a mission – and his mission is not just comforting, but dangerous. This mission drives Jesus back to the wilderness to wrestle with the devil, and it leads him to places of suffering, chaos, and despair.

The baptisms where I preside have been orderly and relatively tame. Still, I suspect that the danger of the river is present, that the heavens are again torn apart so that this new child of God bears with us both Jesus' name and his mission. It is both comforting and dangerous. The river with its power is present, even if we mostly miss this presence.

Sometime I wonder if we can do more to point out that something powerful is happening at a baptism. Perhaps we should issue warnings with our baptismal certificates: "This is a passport to places you never thought you would go, to be an emissary of the living God in the desert and the wilderness, to plant seeds of hope and healing and life."

Though I eschew the danger of the river, I know that it is where God leads me, because I bear God's name. God whispers in my ear and pushes me out to places I am afraid to go. This is what you get for having the water poured over your head, for being called a child of God – whether that water flowed in a river or a font ("Living By the Word", Christian Century, January 7, 2015: 20).

Whether we are baptized at a font, in a pool, in a lake, or in a river, the waters of baptism claim us eternally as God's own. We are forever claimed as an ambassador of Christ, sent to places that are both known and unknown, comfortable and risky. Jesus was claimed and sent to do God's work through the baptism he received from John. So, too, are we claimed and sent to serve, to care, to love, so that God's kingdom might come near.

If you have been baptized, may you be renewed in your vows to turn away from evil, to turn to Jesus Christ, and to be Christ's faithful disciple all the days of your life. If you have not been baptized, may this be an invitation for you to consider accepting this claim and blessing on your life as a child of God. May all of us be moved to hear, once again, that we are beloved in the eyes of our Creator, and that we are eternally marked as God's children, a mark which can never be removed.

Thanks be to God. Amen.