

When I was in elementary school in Carlsbad, NM, my class went on a field trip to the Carlsbad Caverns. I have never forgotten this amazing experience. A park ranger led us with his huge, powerful flashlight on a meandering, descending trail into the deep dark cave. As we walked, we could hear the slow, random drip, drip of the stalagmites as the water condensed and made pools on the cavern floor. When we reached the bottom of the cave, the ranger prepared us to experience total darkness by telling us to stand very still while he turned off his flashlight and the path lights for 60 seconds or so. He had cautioned us to say not a word, but to listen to the natural sounds of the cave and the soft breathing of our fellow classmates. The dripping water and moving air gave the cave a sense of being alive! After a while he told us to hold our hands in front of our faces in an effort to see them; but in total darkness it was impossible for our eyes to adjust. When he finally turned on the lights again, we were not only awed by the absolute nature of total darkness, but also very relieved to be able see again!

The story of Genesis also begins simply, as if coming out of the same sort of darkness and silence. Although there is an eerie sense of unrest; there is nothing but waste and void, and darkness on the face of the deep waters; yet the Spirit of God is hovering over the face of the waters, beginning to move like a breath of wind, preparing to transform the heavens and the earth into something other than the opaque blackness, that contains no sense of order or form – a dark pit of nothingness that is completely unable to sustain life as we know it. The sparse language of the story understates the awesome, creative power of God’s Spirit that is fluttering about, breathing life into the water, exciting the molecules into a sense of order, stirring up grace and goodness within the formless void so that it can function for God’s holy purpose. There is beauty in this scene, and also a sense of wonder and amazement as the Spirit says, “Let there be light!”

And by mere words, ordered life on earth begins. God’s creativity is sparked by his desire to create a symbiotic, balanced cosmos that will work together in harmony and peace. The creation story reveals the activity of God in redemption:

At the beginning there was darkness over the deep, and there was nothing except water; but at the end there was a marvelous creation at rest, blessed and sanctified by God.

Genesis helps us see that God's plan for redemption had begun long before the birth of Jesus Christ, and still continues to this day.

The Gospel of Mark and the liturgical calendar rush immediately into the ministry of Jesus. Last week we were celebrating the Epiphany, when the child Jesus was revealed to the world as Messiah, the Light of the world; and this week Jesus is a 30-year-old man, coming to be baptized by John in the Jordan among sinners. It is an action-packed, earthy account of Jesus' ministry, and is filled with emotions, evil spirits, and other confusing, dramatic expressions. Mark doesn't fully explain why Jesus, the Son of God, was subjected to a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. But it is clear that God intended that Jesus would be baptized, filled with the Holy Spirit, and acknowledged as the Beloved Son of God as he embarked on his ministry, for God's revelation of Jesus was astounding and dramatic –tearing open the heavens – light suddenly flooding in – sending the essence of God as on the wings of a dove, to rest on Jesus. It was a rite of passage, a purification and conversion to ministry. John the Baptist was sent to open the door and make the path straight for Jesus' ministry by preparing all who believed the prophecies of Isaiah. John steps into the Jordan with Jesus and baptizes him; and immediately coming up from the water, the heavens rip open, the Holy Spirit descends and at this moment Jesus fully knows who he is destined to be . . . the anointed Messiah. . . and he calls himself to his own destiny in the name of the Father. As in Genesis, God has once more found humanity pleasing, and blesses us with Salvation.

Everyone in this time – Jews, Greeks, and Gentiles, observed a mark of conversion, regardless of ethnic or religious background; but these baptism rites did not have the same force as that of John's baptism, or that of Jesus' disciples. For the Essenes for instance, it was simply the first of many purification rituals, and only a small component of the process of joining a sect. For John and Jesus' movement, a single emphatic baptism represented an abrupt transition to a new life of service, spiritual growth, and transformation.

Since we now know who Jesus is, we might question why the Son of God, holy and perfect, would go to repent of sin and be baptized among sinners? We find a plausible answer in Paul's letter to the Philippians, Chapter 2: 5-8. Paul describes the person Jesus as he encourages his co-workers to work together in harmony:

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
6 who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8 he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

In all purity, humility, and obedience, Jesus goes to the Jordan to be baptized by John; not because he was a sinner, but because God intended to reveal Jesus to the community of sinners who were gathered with him and who were desperately hoping for a promised savior. His role as he understood it was not to lead the people in glory but to suffer for them in love. At age 12 he went to the synagogue at Nazareth, and chose a passage from the Torah to read aloud to the rabbis and elders:

“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good tidings to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind.”

In his ministry he spoke not for the powerful, but for those who had no advocate -- and he came *not* to call the righteous -- but sinners, the disinherited, the riffraff.

Baptism is the cleansing and purification ritual which sets the baptized apart for a new life of faith and obedience to God. It is also a rite of passage to ministry; it was so for Jesus, and is for all humanity; and because we believe that a miracle

of spiritual change and transformation has taken place in this rite, it is a sacrament of the church. In baptism, we are called to a new way of life as Christ's disciples. God also claims us as beloved children and members of Christ's body, the church, washing us clean from sin as we renounce the power of evil and seek the will and way of God. Anointed with the gifts of the Spirit, we have countless reasons to give God thanks and praise. As Jesus said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water" (John 7.38.)

God has shown his love and blessing for us since creation, but in a way that tests us, makes us grow and mature in faith and character. In the gospels and especially in Mark, the journey to the cross is emphasized; and Jesus tells us that if we are faithful followers, his journey will be ours, too. He begins his ministry by subjecting himself to *us*, and trusts us to carry the burden of his cross by embarking on ministry to those among us. Jesus asks from us no more than he has already done himself. Once in ministry Jesus is caught in a relentless flow of the Holy Spirit, calling himself by God's grace to his own destiny as he proclaims the dying to the old and rising to the new, thus becoming the door through which all believers must pass.

God *was, is, will be* Creator. God is continually speaking and working, and creating afresh through his people. We in fact *expect* new things from such a God! What God has to *say* to us in Jesus Christ is what God in Christ *did* in his life, death and resurrection. Jesus not only *talked* about the coming of the kingdom of God's love, justice, and peace; he *demonstrated* the coming of the kingdom as he healed the sick, forgave sinners, befriended the poor and the excluded. Jesus not only spoke about God's love, he himself loved with the love of God.

In Isaiah 44.3, God speaks:

"For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring".

In Jesus, God is speaking, acting, personally present. *God* is not a man, but *this* man is Emmanuel, God-with-us. As the Gospel of John tells us. "No one has ever seen God; the only Son . . . has made him known" (John 1.18). Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14.9).

The understanding of a 6-year-old is not complete, and neither is our understanding complete as we are baptized, whatever age we are. It is the *beginning* of a journey of faith that will last throughout our earthly life. We cannot expect to know the depth of faith in one deceptively simple act of baptism – but in even a handful of water there is a deep well of mystery and meaning. The confession of sin, the commitment to walk in the footsteps of Christ is renewed each time we confess, turn back to God, and receive grace and strength anew, to take another step on our journey. In a very real sense, we grow up on the road with Jesus.

Are we up to this calling? If so, we can share in God's covenant of grace, *subjecting ourselves* to God's beloved children, serving humbly in love, human touch, and sincerity to *relentlessly* nurture our neighbors in the name of Jesus as though there is not a moment to lose.

Let us pray:

Holy God, you sent your Son to be baptized among sinners, and to seek and save the lost. May we, who have been baptized in his name, never turn away from the world, but reach out in love to rescue the wayward; by the mercy of Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

