

## **"WHO AM I?"**

Mark 1:4-11; Galatians 3:23-29

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When we talk about the story of Jesus' baptism, one of the first reactions people often have is... "*why?*" Why does Jesus get baptized? Why would Jesus *need* to be baptized?

We ask the question because repentance, forgiveness, and a washing away of sin are some of the key meanings we associate with baptism. That's been true throughout all of Christian history. But what's also true is that we've understood Jesus to be God's Son, God incarnate among us, sharing our humanity but not our sinfulness. Which makes Jesus' baptism something of a puzzler. We'd really expect him to be *doing* the baptizing, not getting baptized himself. So what's going on?

Some possibilities:

Jesus is setting an example for us, showing us what we should do.

It's an act of identification with us, with our humanness, our brokenness, our need for a new way, for cleansing, healing.

Maybe it *is* even repentance of a kind: sorrow because of the shared and inescapable reality of sin in the cultures we are all born into – even Jesus.

Perhaps it was a ritual meant to publicly show his readiness to take up a calling; it certainly is presented in the gospels as the beginning point of Jesus ministry.

Maybe it's more personal: Jesus' own preparation for what lies ahead.

I don't know if it's any of those things, or all of them.

But I did notice something as I was reading Mark's account.

At the start of the scene, baptism is about repentance and forgiveness of sins. John's message must have touched something, resonated somehow, because people were coming from all over to listen to this unconventional preacher tell them they were sinners in need of repentance. They responded by confessing their sins and wading into the river en masse to be baptized.

This is the scene Jesus comes into. Mark doesn't tell us about any conversation between Jesus and John, only that Jesus was baptized by John. And then as Jesus comes up out of the water, this bit about the heavens opening (I'm not sure what that means) and the Spirit like a dove and the voice that says "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Jesus is God's child. He is beloved. And God is pleased. (Notice... Jesus hasn't actually *done* anything yet, not that Mark has told us about. But God is pleased anyway!)

It starts out with sin and repentance, but by the end of the story, baptism seems to be about *identity*.

Identity is a fraught concept in our culture. Sometimes people are accused of engaging in divisive "identity politics" because they insist that the particular concerns, voices, and history of a community they're part of need to be heard. At the same time, there are those who feel their identity threatened by anyone perceived as different, outsider, other, or inferior – to the extent they want to exclude or silence or limit the people they fear.

We see individuals we care about take difficult, sometimes risky, steps to claim an identity that feels authentic to them... and we struggle to understand, even as we also fear for them, because we know there are those who would deny their experience.

We live in a world which demands that we be able to prove our identity – to travel, use the internet, get health care, do business, access benefits. We have to worry about losing our passports or forgetting some of our 347 passwords... and about identity theft. There are nightmare stories out there... and just as many companies ready to sell us services that promise to protect our identity.

On a more personal level, most of us have wrestled with questions of identity at one time or another. Our sense of "who we are" is shaped early on by so many things: the families we came from, the culture we're immersed in, the roles we're socialized into, the way we process the world, our experiences both good and bad, things we gravitate to and abilities we have, what we learn along the way.

The most momentous thing about moving from childhood into adulthood is figuring out "who we are," and what that means for our life choices. But it's not just a question for young adulthood. We end up re-thinking "who we are" over and over again as our roles and responsibilities change, as our beliefs and desires evolve, sometimes as our lives get upended by the tragic or the unexpected.

And it's not an easy question, at any stage of life! For most of us, who we are is tied up with the work we do, or have done, and with our roles with respect to others. The groups we belong to or identify with. But who we are is more, and deeper, than those things.

Who we are is also made up of: the beliefs we hold dear. Our stories. The things that bring us joy. Activities that make us feel creative and fulfilled. Stuff we're passionate

about. What we know. Our gift and abilities. The good we try to do. The strengths or weaknesses we perceive ourselves to have. And our hurts and disappointments and failures, too. Challenges we've dealt with. How we've grown and changed.

But in spite of all the unique and personal things that make up our sense of self, we have to contend – I'm not sure we ever get done with this – with *all* that other people and our society have tried to tell us about who we are: how girls should behave, what boys are supposed to do, what "successful" looks like, what makes a family, who is "in," who is "out," who is "deserving," whose opinion matters, whose doesn't, where you belong and where you don't, what makes you a good Christian.

Most of us have probably felt the specific pressure of who someone else – a parent, child, spouse, friend, boss – wanted us to be. We've let ourselves be shaped by the way others see us. We've internalized an ideal self-image and tried desperately to live up to it. We measure ourselves against media-created expectations about how we should look, what we should like, what we should be accomplishing, how much stronger we could be.

It's hard to sort ourselves out! Hard to pay attention to our hearts, listen to the Spirit, discern what's true. And sometimes, even when we think we have a pretty good idea who we are, it's hard to separate that from the expectations that are placed on us and the voices in our heads that tell us we aren't good enough.

We take time to remember our baptism because we need to remember who we are. Who we *really* are. That's what baptism is about.

Baptism has many layers of meaning. We could spend all day delving into the symbolism of the water (cleansing, life-giving, refreshing), the idea of dying and rising to new life, the covenant commitment involved, how baptism enfolds us into the community of faith.

In his telling of Jesus' baptism, Mark shows us what might be the most fundamental and important baptismal understanding: You are God's child. You are beloved. God is pleased.

That's where Jesus started. That's where we start.

Paul writes to the Christians in Galatia about baptism and about identity, words that have steered us away from division and hierarchy: "There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28) Sometimes those words are understood as *erasing* differences, suggesting that gender, social status, ethnicity and so forth mean nothing to the community of faith, that we ought to ignore all of that.

I don't see this as a sound understanding of what Paul means. It's clear from his letters that he values diversity in the church. A more helpful way to hear this verse, I think, is as a reminder that cultural messages, role expectations, idealized images, or the demands of other people don't define who we are. They don't need to define for us what it means to be a man or a woman (or non-binary, for that matter). They don't define for us what it means to be a person of privilege or part of a group that's had to struggle for acceptance. They don't have to shape how we live as people of faith.

The context of Paul's words is the "big idea" of the book of Galatians: freedom in Christ. Here I believe he's urging the Galatians – and us – to begin with what baptism tells us about who we are in Christ... and let that free us from false and inauthentic and limited notions of who we are (or who we are supposed to be).

In baptism we are claimed as God's own.  
You are God's child. Beloved. A joy to God.

So let nothing less than the love of God, the call of Jesus, the life-giving breath of the Spirit show you who and how you are meant to be ... as a friend, a citizen, a parent, a worker, a church member, a grandparent, a caregiver, a leader, a servant, a learner, a person with limitations, a person with gifts, ...a human, ...a Christian.

One of Jan Richardson's beautiful blessings includes the words "Beloved is where we begin." Begin there. What better place can there be to begin than where Jesus began?

Amen.