

Message: "Waterless Baptism"

Scripture: Mark 1:4-11

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, "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. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

How terrified are you of 2024? Not Are you terrified of 2024, but how terrified are you of 2024? It's a subtle but telling difference; The question assumes a degree of terror for all of us, for if 2024 is anything like 2023, we are in for a very difficult ride. And I don't have to tell you, the signs of what is coming in this next year are the very definition of ominous.

This question, "how terrified are you of 2024?" was posed in an article written by Robert Reich. Mr. Reich is an American professor, author, lawyer, and political commentator. He worked in the administrations of Presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, and served as Secretary of Labor from 1993 to 1997 in the cabinet of President Bill Clinton. He was also a member of President Barack Obama's economic transition advisory board. In other words, he has significant political experience and, at least to me, some solid insights that hold credibility.

His question acknowledges what should be obvious but is often downplayed - that there is much to fear in this upcoming year. But he calls himself an optimist, pointing out the things we should be terrified about for the purpose of motivating our efforts to change things for the better. His advice is to meet the terror by remembering not just who we are, but who we are called to be as citizens of this country; our calling is to live life in a particular way, based on the principles that work for the common good, which we have largely lost sight of in our nation. Our hope rests in being able to claim or reclaim our calling.

I was struck by how much this resonates with what is going on in our scripture passage today. Jesus is claiming his calling; he is being baptized by John the Baptist. He was plunged into the waters of the Jordan River most likely with John sharing words of repentance and grace; he comes out of the water to hear a voice

saying "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." It is not clear if others heard the voice or only Jesus, but the message is clear: Jesus is someone special.

But is his specialness acknowledged for who he has been as a child born to a virgin? Or possibly for what is called "the hidden years" of Jesus in his youth, where we have so very little information about his life? Or is the specialness of Jesus a mostly future consideration, with God stating his being pleased with Jesus for what he is about to do as he starts his formal ministry? Or is the specialness of Jesus inserted at the very moment when he surfaces from that water after being baptized by Jesus, with some scholars even proposing that Jesus didn't know he was called by God until that very moment when God both told him and gave him the spiritual components required for messiahship on earth?

Am I thinking too much about this?

Maybe - but I'm not alone by any means; these are the considerations that have cycled around by theologians and mystics and pastors and spiritualists for ages and ages; it concerns the basic questions of Baptism - what is it? What is it for? What does it mean? What does it convey? How does it work? If you research the various responses out there in the world of the internet, you get an overwhelming diversity of opinion on the matter.

Take this case in point - one particular denomination, which shall remain unnamed but for the statement that it is not United Methodist, has a detailed explanation for what liquid is appropriate as the main article to be used for ritual observance: the explanation is as follows (and I quote): "[Water for baptism should be taken from the most natural, pure source possible - rivers, lakes, and natural bodies of water are ideal.]Water derived from melted ice, snow, or hail is also valid. ... As to a mixture of water and some other material, it is held as proper matter, provided the water certainly predominates and the mixture would still be called water. Invalid matter is every liquid that is not usually designated true water. Such are oil, saliva, wine, tears, milk, sweat, soup, the juice of fruits and any mixture containing water which men would no longer call water. When it is doubtful whether a liquid could really be called water, it is not permissible to use it for baptism except in case of absolute necessity when

no certainly valid matter can be obtained." As a final note, the article mentioned that Pope Gregory IX established in the 1200's that baptism with beer is not valid. (I think I just gave away the denomination!)

Me thinkest they miss the point, perhaps?

This makes me think of an experience Rev. Hugh Herbert shared with me on several occasions. Hugh was a twice-appointed pastor of this church and was a towering figure of Conference knowledge and preaching prowess. I was privileged to know him for the last few years of his life. He was full of anecdotes about his experiences in pastoral ministry. One such story he told me was about an argument he overheard in this sanctuary many years ago; the two people were discussing what a proper baptism entailed. As Hugh told the story, things had become a bit heated through disagreement; voices were raised so that most people could hear what was being said. Finally, one of the individuals had had enough, and he stated loud enough for all to hear, "IT DOESN'T MATTER IF YOU'RE SPRINKLED, SPRAYED, DIPPED OR DUNKED - BAPTISM IS BAPTISM!" (I hope I recounted that story correctly!)

I think the nature of that comment was what scripture makes clear, but what we often forget - that baptism is not about the water; it's about the spirit. It's about the workings of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in the world; the life of God's spirit given to God's people; how open we are to believe and receive what God offers us, all of us, all the time. The water is only a vehicle for the message, a symbol standing in for something deeper and more mysterious, and yet so very accessible to all; it is water for a soul dying of thirst, it is food for a life dying of despair, it is hope for a world falling apart. God's spirit is the point of baptism; baptism, whether using water or something else, is simply saying "yes" to the gift Jesus revealed to the world.

Now, then - what does our "yes" to God imply? For answers to that question, please come to worship for the next 51 Sundays, for that is precisely what we will be talking about!