

“Becoming the people of God: And there was morning”

Mark 1:4-11

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I found myself easily distracted yesterday. I watched TV. I watched perhaps too long. I was easily distracted by the many things to watch. There was the basketball game between Kentucky Wildcats and Florida Gators. Kentucky was able to squeak out a victory by the final buzzer. Now the Wildcat fans can't complain and moan this week as their team won. There were the commercials on home delivery food. I could get food for game day ready to eat. I could get groceries delivered to my doorstep. If only they would fill my pantry or refrigerator, I might be tempted with grocery delivery. There was the attraction to see that “A New Hope” was here in the Star Wars series. But to realize this young Jedi was older than many of us in the congregation. I refused to be distracted by that programming while I waited for the football game to start.

We get distracted easily, don't we?

So we turn to these passages that takes us back our beginnings: Genesis 1 and Mark 1. In Genesis, we see creation happening day after day with the pronouncement “It is good!” In the gospel of Mark, we see the baptismal waters of John the Baptist. It Jesus who comes to these waters to begin his ministry.

This is important that we focus on our beginnings as we focus on “Becoming the People of God.”

John the Baptist was a prophet—the first real prophet in Israel's living memory. People who had been longing for a prophet all their lives suddenly found one.

John didn't make it easy for them. He could have held revival meetings in synagogues—one week here and another week there—but he didn't. He could have set up shop in the temple—but he didn't. He could have set up a soapbox on a busy Jerusalem corner—but he didn't.

John went into the wilderness—the desert wilderness—a place where water is scarce and slithery creatures plentiful. The wilderness had special meaning for Israel. Israel became a nation in the wilderness. It was in the wilderness that they learned to obey God. They had to relearn that lesson over and over again, because they were so inclined not to obey God—but God used the wilderness to shape Israel and to save them.

John the baptizer went to the wilderness, where there was no pulpit—no pews—and no people. John went there to preach—a crazy idea, really—but somehow people learned that there was a prophet in the wilderness, and so they went in droves to hear him.

When they got there, they heard John preach a very simple sermon. The Gospel of Mark tells us that John preached “the baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins” (v. 4). Let me repeat that. John preached, “the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” John’s sermon had three points:

The first point to become the people of God was REPENTANCE. When people repented, their repentance led them to the baptismal waters—so repentance is where they had to start.

Most people think that repentance is feeling guilty—but it’s much more than that. The New Testament was written originally in Greek, and the Greek word is *metanoia* (pronounced met-AN-oy-ah). *Metanoia* involved changing one’s mind—changing one’s heart. That’s where it all real change begins, isn’t it—changing our mind—changing our heart. Once we decide to quit believing lies and start believing truth, we will begin to move in a new direction.

That’s where the guilt comes in—what can be a by-product of repentance and not the main thing. Changing our minds—changing the direction of our lives—that’s what repentance is all about. Once we quit living by lies and start living by the truth, we are likely to say, “What was I thinking! Why was I screwing up my life—and everyone else’s! Why was I doing things that hurt other people!” That’s the point that we start to feel guilty—when our new understanding makes it clear how much misery we have caused.

But then we come to John’s second point—BAPTISM. To become the people of God, once people changed their minds and began to follow the truth, John said, “Now you need to be baptized.” Their baptism acknowledged that they had become new people—Godly people.

Up until that time, Jews baptized only Gentiles. Jews were the people of God, and they figured that they didn’t need any help. They used baptism to make Godly people out of Gentiles. Jews thought that they didn’t need baptism, because they were already part of the people of God.

But John baptized Jews, because even they too needed new hearts. They too needed to start listening to God. They too needed to change their minds and move in a new direction.

In the book of Romans, Paul spells out the meaning of Christian baptism. He says that when we were baptized, we were buried with Jesus into his death—so “that just like Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). Did you catch that? Baptism is burial with Jesus—and resurrection to a new life. It makes us into a new people—the people of God.

Then we come to John’s third point to become the people of God —FORGIVENESS OF SINS. Once we get our heads screwed on the right direction—and start living a new life with Christ—we’re likely to worry that our report card has been indelibly stained. But our repentance and

baptism usher in the forgiveness of our sins. God wipes our record clean. God gives us a fresh start.

We need that, don't we! We need a fresh start. We need a fresh start, not just once, but almost every day—because most of us with some regularity do or say something that we shouldn't—so we need God's forgiveness day after day. But the God who forgave us yesterday will forgive us today—and will forgive us tomorrow—and will also help us to walk the straight and narrow path that leads to life (Matthew 7:14).

Then Mark concludes with the story of Jesus' baptism. Mark's was the first Gospel to be written—and it's the shortest—a bare-bones account of Jesus' life. Mark's account of Jesus' baptism was like that—very brief. He just says that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan (v. 9). Then he says:

“Immediately coming up from the water,  
(Jesus) saw the heavens parting,  
and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.  
A voice came out of the sky,  
‘You are my beloved Son,  
in whom I am well pleased’” (vv. 10-11).

We might ask why Jesus was baptized. He didn't need to repent. He didn't need to be forgiven. Why, then, was he baptized? It was to establish his identity as the Son of God. It was to give God the opportunity to say:

“You are my beloved Son,  
in whom I am well pleased.”

The question then is what this has to do with us? To answer, let me start at the end—the part where the voice from heaven says:

“You are my beloved Son,  
in whom I am well pleased.”

It is this beloved Son of God in whom we believe—whom we follow—and who made it possible for us to become new people—members of the household of faith—members of the family of God.

Then let me go back to the beginning—briefly—I'll keep this short.

**REPENTANCE:** People of God, let's practice repentance every day. The Evil One is out there, and we can be sure that The Evil One will try every day to get us to move in the wrong direction. So every day we are likely to have reason to repent—and to ask Jesus to help us once again to move in the right direction.

**BAPTISM:** Let's celebrate our baptism every day, people of God. Let's remember that our baptism made us new people—people of God. Then let's remember to act like God's people—to love and to forgive as God loves and forgives.

**FORGIVENESS:** Forgiveness might be the hardest. How difficult it is to believe that God has actually forgiven us? Most of us have lots of little sins—but many of us have done some pretty

terrible things at some point in our lives. The hard thing is to believe that God has forgiven us for the terrible things. Let me assure you that he has.

You may at one time have dwelled in a pig sty, but at your baptism God cleaned you up—and put a new robe on your shoulders—and new shoes for your feet—and a ring for your finger (like the Prodigal, see Luke 15). He brought you back into his home and made it your home. He welcomed you back into his family. He wiped your slate clean—never to be mentioned again.

Repent, be baptized, and receive God's forgiveness. That's the formula for a new life. Believe it! Live it people of God!