



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“WHY BAPTISM MATTERS”

Scripture Lessons: Mark 1:1-11

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, January 10, 2010.

This Sunday on the church's liturgical calendar is called Baptism of the Lord. It follows the feast of Epiphany which occurred this past Wednesday, January 6. We are reminded on this day that Jesus' ministry to bring in God's rule was inaugurated at his baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. Mark's gospel, the very first gospel written, opens with the preaching of John and the baptism of Jesus. Immediately Jesus enters the wilderness where he is tempted and then enters Galilee and begins preaching the gospel and proclaiming the kingdom of God. Thus his ministry had begun.

I wonder if most of us fully realize the significance and the transformational power of Jesus' baptism. At any rate, this is a day to celebrate and to seek to better understand both Jesus' baptism and our own. With this in mind I invite you to listen to Mark 1:1-11 as it is read and then we will reflect together upon its importance, both for Jesus and for those of us who have been baptized in his name.

Hardly anyone but Jesus recognized the profound significance of what was going on at his baptism. And I have to admit that it was a rather strange and mysterious event, the significance of which could easily be overlooked. It took place on the outer fringes of a remote province in the Roman Empire, far removed from people and events that would have seemed far more significant at the time.

Here is John, a rugged, austere, unconventional fire and brimstone wilderness preacher taking people down to the Jordan River for a baptism of repentance, demanding that they make a conscious about-face in their moral and religious living. And here is this little known, upcountry rabbi, fresh out of a carpenter's shop in Nazareth, submitting himself to John's baptism of repentance. Now how in the world could that event really have mattered? To be sure, it probably did not matter to King Herod, or to Pontius Pilate, the governor at the time and least of all to Tiberius Caesar back in Rome. In fact, it doesn't even seem to matter much to the religious leaders of that remote country or to the people who had followed all of their rituals and rules. So why did his baptism matter at all?

What mattered in Jesus' baptism was not seen or experienced by anyone other than Jesus. It was for him, however, a private epiphany --- a revelation from God, a manifestation of the presence of God in his life. And this Epiphany consisted of two parts --- a vision and a voice.

First, there is the vision. We're told that the heavens are ripped apart and the Spirit descended upon Jesus as a dove. But no one saw that except for Jesus. Actually what Mark is telling us is that Jesus is empowered by the Holy Spirit of God so that he will now go out and baptize his followers with that same Spirit.

The other part of the epiphany is the voice of God, this too heard by Jesus alone in his own heart, and confirming for him that he is indeed the son of God, the beloved son of God with whom his father is extremely pleased. From this moment on Jesus knows without question who he is, but the others in Mark's gospel do not. If you carefully read through Mark's gospel you will see that it is only the demons who are aware of who Jesus is and they fear both his person and his power. It is not until the very end of Mark's gospel, as Jesus is hanging upon the cross, that the Romans centurion who

watches Jesus die confesses, “Truly, this man was God’s son!” (Mark 15:39). This is the first time in Mark’s gospel that a human being correctly identifies Jesus as God’s own son. But from that moment on the world will be told.

Now I would suggest to you that the baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan River, an event that was unreported in any news paper and never discussed in any homes at the time, much less in the citadels of government or in the halls of learning, was without a doubt the most important thing that happened that year, though no one knew it at the time. Jesus’ baptism mattered more than anything else that occurred. And why is that? You see the baptism of Jesus establishes within the mind and heart of Jesus his own identity and his calling. He knows for certain from this moment on that he is truly the son of God and he understands as well what his mission is to be as God’s Suffering Servant, prophesied by Isaiah. You see, the voice that Jesus hears from the heavens quotes both a Psalm and a Suffering Servant song from the prophecy of Isaiah and in these words of his Father that he hears he understands the course that his life is to take, as Son and Servant And so it is in the Jordan at his baptism Jesus’ own identity and his mission are confirmed for him.

Now this brings us to our own baptism and our own personal lives. Why does our baptism --- yours and mine --- really matter? It matters, my friends, because our baptism means for us the very same thing that Jesus’ baptism meant for him. It is our epiphany, our revelation or manifestation of God’s presence and purpose in our lives. In the waters of baptism God reveals to each of us our true identity, who we really are --- sons and daughters of the living God. Baptism names us as that, as children of the covenant, and dramatizes before the church and the world that God’s Spirit dwells within us and is at work through us.

What does that say to you where you are at the moment? What is going on in your life right now that seems far more important than your baptism? What is going on with you health, with your work, with your family life, with your education or your various relationships? What is occurring in the lives of your children? These are all matters of immense importance but if any of those things are more important than what happens to you in baptism, then you are in trouble. Let me suggest to you that what matters most, as strange as it may seem, is what occurs in your baptism. When Jesus was baptized, he knew in his heart that he was in the hands of the One who created the world and that he belonged to this same One who governs the world. He knew he would be sustained through his life and death by the Holy One who could turn even the agony and pain of death into ultimate victory.

My friends, because you are baptized, you too can be assured that come what may, no matter what happens in life, you are not only known to God but you belong to God and there is absolutely nothing that can separate you from the love of God. You know this because in your baptism God’s Spirit has taken up residence in your life to bring you fullness of life and to bring you into the maturity of a life like Jesus Christ, which is precisely that for which you were made.

Consequently, you and I need not despair because of what may be occurring in our lives or in the life of the world in any given moment. To be sure there are events taking place in the world that seem quite important. What is happening in our families, in our careers, in our communities, in our churches is highly significant. What is going on within this nation and the world seems of paramount importance on occasion, but believe it or not, as important as these matters are they are not really of ultimate importance. But what is of ultimate importance is the precious truth that you belong to God. You are a child of God and he has claimed you in the waters of baptism.

In Flanary O’Connor’s story, “The River”, a baby sitter takes a little boy whose parents ignore him to a river side service, during which he is baptized. When the boy comes up out of the water, the preacher tells the boy, “You count now.” Now no doubt in God’s eyes the boy counted before, but his

baptism should have convinced him that he mattered indeed for he was a child of God, a child of the covenant.

And this reminds me of a wonderful story told by Fred Craddock, former professor of Preaching at Chandler Seminary in Atlanta and recorded in his book, Craddock Stories.

Nettie and I had returned from Oklahoma to one of our favorite vacations spots, The Great Smoky Mountains. We were at dinner in a restaurant out from Gatlinburg near the small community of Cosby. We were in a rather new restaurant called the Black Bear Inn. It was very attractive and had an excellent view of the mountains.

Early in the meal an elderly man approached our table and said, "Good evening." I said, "Good evening."

He said, "Are you on Vacation?"

I said, "Yes," but under my breath I was saying, *It's really none of your business.*

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"We're from Oklahoma."

"What do you do in Oklahoma?"

Under my breath but almost audible, I was saying, *Leave us alone. We're on vacation, and we don't know who you are.* I said, "I am a Christian minister."

He said, "What church?"

I said, "The Christian Church."

He paused a moment and said, "I owe a great deal to a minister of the Christian church," and he pulled out a chair and sat down.

I said, "Yes, have a seat." I tried to make it seem like I sincerely meant it, but I didn't. Who is this person?

He said, "I grew up in these mountains. My mother was not married, and the whole community knew it. I was what was called an illegitimate child. In those days that was a shame, and I was ashamed. The reproach that fell on her, of course, fell also on me. When I went into town with her, I could see people staring at me, making guesses as to who was my father. At school the children said ugly things to me, and so I stayed to myself during recess, and I ate my lunch alone.

"In my early teens I began to attend a little church back in the mountains called Laurel Springs Christian Church. It had a minister who was both attractive and frightening. He had a chiseled face and a heavy beard and a deep voice. I went to hear him preach. I don't know exactly why, but it did something for me. However, I was afraid that I was not welcome since I was, as they put it, a bastard. So I would go just in time for the sermon, and when it was over I would move out because I was afraid that someone would say, 'What's a boy like you doing in a church?'

"One Sunday some people queued up in the aisle before I could get out, and I was stopped. Before I could make my way through the group, I felt a hand on my shoulder, a heavy hand. It was that minister. I cut my eyes around and caught a glimpse of his beard and his chin, and I knew who it was. I trembled in fear. He turned his face around so he could see mine and seemed to be staring for a little while. I knew what he was doing. He was going to make a guess as to who my father was. A moment later he said, 'Well, boy you're a child of . . .' and he paused there. And I knew it was coming. I knew I would have my feelings hurt. I knew I would not go back again. He said, 'Boy, you're a child of God. I see a striking resemblance, boy.' Then he swatted me on the bottom and said, 'Now, you go claim your inheritance.' I left the building a different person. In fact, that was really the beginning of my life."

I was so moved by the story I had to ask him, "What's your name?"

He said, "Ben Hooper."

I recalled, though vaguely, my own father talking when I was just a child about how the people of Tennessee had twice elected as governor a bastard, Ben Hooper.

Martin Luther, when he faced a problem or a trying circumstance in his life, would often touch his forehead and say to himself, "Baptismatus sum," which means "I am baptized". So Luther's baptism, in other words, reminded him in difficult and dark days that he belonged, heart, mind and soul to God.

Who tells you who you are? Who is in a position to tell you who you are? Only the one who created you! Only the one who in Jesus Christ has redeemed you. Who is little Grayson Glenn that will be baptized this morning? Is she simply the child of Ryan & Carmen? Is she the sister of Walker or the grandchild of Frank & Katherine and Art & Deborah? Well she is all of these things but the most important thing she is as we will confess in our baptism today is that she is a child of God, a child of the covenant.

And who are you and who am I? We tend to identify ourselves to others by our occupations, our family relationships, our political parties, our church affiliations, our social or educational connections, but what truly matters about us is that we are the very children of God and our baptism recognizes and claims this profound truth.

The world may look upon us as something else indeed --- as consumers, as producers, as voters, as a number of things. But the one thing that matters more than all of these is the reality that we are children of God and servants of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Some of you may be familiar with Belmont Abby College in Belmont, NC, a little Roman Catholic school situated on property which was once a large southern plantation. On the back of the property the monks, years ago, discovered a large granite stone upon which African men and women and children once stood in order to be sold as slaves. The monks did an interesting and inspirational thing with that stone. They took it and hollowed a bowl in the middle of it and brought it into the school chapel to be used as the baptismal font. On the stone they engraved these words: "Upon this rock men were once sold into slavery. Now upon this rock, through the waters of baptism, men become free children of God."

My friends, that is what matters more than anything else about you and about me and that is why baptism matters. Let us never forget it.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Prayer:

Gracious God, we praise you for claiming us in the waters of baptism. Give us the grace to accept your acceptance of us and to live as your redeemed children, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.