

“The Beginning ...”

The Morning Message for Reign of Christ Sunday
United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
Sunday, January 12, 2020
Text: Mark1:1-11

This Sunday has long been recognized as Baptism of Christ Sunday and as such has always been an important and sacred day on church calendars. In the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, the date of this Sunday may be up for debate but its significance is not. The Baptism of Jesus the Christ in the Jordan River by John the Baptist, also known as John the Baptizer and even John the Immerser, is the beginning of Jesus’ ministry and all that transpired as a result. At least that’s what we’ve been told. That’s what we’ve been taught. But is it really true? Was this day when Jesus appeared out of nowhere on the banks of the Jordan asking his cousin John to baptize him as he had already done for so many others – was this really when it all began? Was this really what kicked off the movement we now know as Christianity which through all its many twists and turns over the centuries led to us being here this morning?

One thing is for sure. We can’t really understand Jesus’ baptism if we don’t take a moment to understand John – who he was and why he was the one Jesus would turn to in this moment when it was time for him to become who he was born to be. We actually don’t talk about John all that much in the Protestant tradition. I remember he used to be a popular subject for Sunday

School lessons when I was a child because of his decidedly unusual, downright peculiar appearance and living preferences. Both the Gospels of Matthew and Mark describe him as “clothed with camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.” He was always portrayed to us in those Sunday School posters as a kind of biblical Grizzly Adams who ate bugs and honey. I can still remember my entire class of 12 enthusiastic 3rd graders letting out a loud, collective “EWWWW!” at that little tidbit of information. But John was so much more than a crazy wild man with a strange diet which is why he deserves a closer look by us this morning.

The first thing to realize is that John the Baptist was a real person. We know this because there is a historical record of him written by the Jewish historian Josephus in the 1st century. Important to note in this regard is that historical references of Jesus are not so precise. John is also a major religious figure in no less than four of the world’s religions: Christianity, Islam, Baha’i and Mandaism. In fact, the Mandaeans claim that it was John the Baptist who was the true Messiah, not Jesus. We also know from the Gospel of Luke that John was related to Jesus because John’s mother was Elizabeth, the relative to whom Jesus’ mother Mary ran for comfort after her extraordinary visit from the angel Gabriel. How well they knew each other when Jesus appeared that day on the banks of the Jordan no one knows. Did

they recognize each other? Did Jesus go to see John because he knew him as family and not just as some sort of itinerant preacher? The Scriptures don't give us any information on that, on what their relationship was, or if there even was a relationship, before they met on that day at the Jordan. But we do know that John and what he was doing before Jesus even showed up that day at the Jordan had a tremendous impact on Jesus and what he would do during the years of his ministry leading up to his crucifixion, three short years later.

So, what was John doing before Jesus showed up that day? We don't know much about John's upbringing, when it was he decided he'd rather live out in the wilderness eating bugs and honey than living a more conventional life. There is some suspicion that he was a member of the Essene religious group, an ascetic community active during this time period and the group widely believed to be responsible for what we know as the Dead Sea Scrolls. Again, we don't know for sure but his lifestyle was certainly reminiscent of their beliefs. What we do know about John was that he was responsible for beginning a new Jewish renewal movement before Jesus ever appeared on the scene. John's message was that he, as described in the writings of the prophet Isaiah, was preparing the way for one who would come after him. This is the "good news" Mark refers to in the text we read this morning, and that good news is that there would soon be

a new anointed king of Israel, a powerful message to a people being systematically and brutally repressed by the Roman Empire. This description of John as one preparing the way was intended to call to mind for the people the Exodus when Moses, the great leader who came out of the desert, led the Hebrew slaves to freedom and a new covenantal relationship with God. John was preaching that the people could reclaim that ancient covenantal relationship with God IF they were willing to repent of their sins of breaking the ancient covenant (the Ten Commandments) *and* change their ways to live as the people of God should live. John's baptism was a ritual cleansing of the sins of the people so they would be purified to reclaim this ancient relationship with God.

Another important thing to understand about John is that his message of repentance and a return to right relationship with God was remarkably similar to what Jesus' own message would one day be. Luke's Gospel tells us that John was asked by the people what they should do to change their lives as he preached. He responded by telling them they needed to share what they had with those in need, that tax collectors should collect no more tax than was owed instead of taking extra for themselves; that soldiers should not use their power to make life difficult for other people. In other words, John was thinking about the least of these, that very group of the most marginalized people who would soon form the bedrock of Jesus' teachings known as the great

reversal – the last shall be first and the first shall be last. This is that belief foundational to Jesus’ teachings, that caring for the least of these is how one’s love for God is proven rather than in ritual sacrifice.

All this was in play on that long ago day when Jesus made his way to the banks of the Jordan River seeking to be baptized by John. We know almost nothing of Jesus’ childhood, youth and young adulthood. We only know that one day he just showed up asking John to baptize him and that moment marked the beginning of his ministry. This one moment is why Mark’s Gospel begins with this story of Jesus’ baptism. This is the moment for Mark, the oldest of the Gospels, that was the beginning of all that was to come after. This was the moment when Jesus changed from just another carpenter from Nazareth into the man who would become Jesus the Christ. And the thing is, John was expecting Jesus to show up one day. Did he know it would be Jesus his cousin? We don’t know and I don’t think it matters. What does matter is that it’s clear John was telling the people coming to him to be baptized, “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. I have baptized you with water but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” John is telling them very clearly he knows who he is in God’s plan and it is to do one thing – prepare the people for the one who is still to come. This is why the

moment of Jesus' baptism is so momentous. This is why it is no surprise that as Jesus is baptized by John, all the Gospel accounts describe a heavenly sign from God that this is truly God's Son. "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased," is Mark's account.

So, here we are at the beginning of it all, of all that Jesus will do, all the lives he will transform both during his own life and over the centuries. Mark's Gospel doesn't care about the nativity stories where Matthew and Luke begin the story. Mark is a "just the facts" sort of writer when it comes to recording the life of Jesus. He could care less about the human interest side of the Jesus story portrayed in the accounts of his birth in Matthew and Luke. What mattered to Mark is that Jesus showed up one day and that John knew he was coming and was ready, willing and able to set the whole process in motion. Jesus changed everything and John helped him make that transition from who he had been to who God always intended him to be.

This, I think, is the point where this story provides insight into our own lives. Who is it that God might be calling you to be as a new year and a new decade begins? I'm betting it's the you who's already here, the person with good days and bad days, the person who is sometimes floating on air and other times curled up in a corner with tears in your eyes. I know that's who God is asking you to be because God loves you just as you are. Now this

isn't to say there isn't room for improvement for every one of us because there always is. None of us is perfect. We all make mistakes. We all do things that hurt other people sometimes. We all do things we wish we hadn't done. But, here's the thing, there's always a chance to be better the next time, the next day, the next time the situation where you messed up comes back around again. And, with God's help you will be more of the person you want to be, the person God created you to be when that second chance, that begin again moment comes around.

Never forget the one little truth of this story about Jesus' baptism that we so often gloss right over and is really so very important. John's baptism was a ritual of sins being forgiven, of covenantal rules broken for which that forgiveness was needed and Jesus showed up to be baptized. *Jesus showed up to be baptized* and that can only be because Jesus believed he had sinned. Jesus believed he needed that ritual purification just as much as everyone else did who was coming to John. Jesus' baptism was "the beginning" for him in the same way it is for any of us when we make the decision to live as people transformed by the unconditional love of God.

This is the foundation of everything else Jesus taught and did, every healing performed, every parable told, every sin forgiven. It all comes down to this – new beginnings for anyone are always possible with God, the very same God for whom

nothing is impossible. Dear friends, we are beloved of God, created by God to make a difference in this world just by being ourselves transformed by the amazing, limitless and miraculous love of God. The beginning is today for you, for me, for all of us. So what will be your new beginning today? Amazing to think about, isn't it. Amen.