1-6/7-18 Rev. Amy Haines

Mark 1:4-11 Claimed

It would be a moment the cousins would never forget.

John was in his normal ministry setting, set up in the desert near the Jordan River. Day after day John bluntly called for people to repent, and he baptized those who sought God’s forgiveness

and were willing to change their heart and their lives. Time and again John also proclaimed that there would be one who would follow him and would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Imagine John’s surprise when that one whom he proclaimed suddenly appeared along the banks of the Jordan River, seeking to be baptized. John knew Jesus had no real need to be baptized. Frankly John felt unworthy to baptize his cousin. Yet in faithfulness, John obeyed.

Down Jesus went, under the water, signifying his death to sin.

Up Jesus came, out of the water, signifying his commitment to new life.

And at that moment, our Gospel proclaims, Jesus saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove. And Jesus heard the voice of God proclaim, “You are my Son, my beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

At first glance, Jesus’ baptism appears to be a comforting moment of affirmation. Yet listen closer to Mark’s Gospel, and instead you will hear a world changing word.

The Gospel of Mark has no birth narrative and no wise men visiting the boy child. Instead Mark immediately begins his gospel with Jesus’ baptism, and those moments by the riverbank define for Mark who this gospel is all about.

Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, yes; yet Jesus is also God’s Son, the beloved, with whom God is well pleased.

Jesus is claimed as God’s beloved Son before his ministry ever began. Jesus heard these words at his baptism before he ever preached a sermon, before he ever healed one person, before he ever called his first disciple. For thirty years Jesus had grown up and learned how to live as an obedient Jew, a hard working carpenter and a rabbi.

So when Jesus traveled from the Galilee down to the Jordan River outside of Jerusalem to be baptized by his cousin John the Baptist, Jesus had not yet done anything to show who he was or why he came to earth.

Yet God still tore open the heavens, sent the Holy Spirit like a dove, and reminded Jesus who and whose he was. “You are my Son, my beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

For the Gospel of Mark, this moment is a foundational moment for Jesus’ identity, life and ministry. In essence, Jesus was being told remember who you are- you are my Son sent to fulfill my work in this world. Remember who you are as you go forth from this moment. Remember who you are when you are tempted in the desert, surrounded by the crowds, healing lepers,

questioned by religious leaders, and hanging on a cross. Remember that you are my Son, my Beloved, and with you I am well pleased. Then, once you remember who and whose you are,

then go with the power of the Holy Spirit, into the world to save the world, to transform the world, and to remind others that they, too, are God’s beloved, loved and forgiven and redeemed.

From the beginning of time, the Bible reminds us that God named and claimed humanity as the beloved children of God. First it was Adam and Eve named as God’s beloved creation in the Garden of Eden. Then it was Abraham and the people Israel claimed as God’s chosen race.

But when Jesus came to earth, God named and claimed all of humanity as God’s beloved children-Jew and Gentile, male and female, old and young, slave and free.

God names and claims us not because of an ego trip, but because God’s nature is to love. Like a mother who loves the child whom she carries and births and like a father who loves even a wayward son, God loves each and every one of us with abundant and agape love. And unlike some parents and stepparents today, God will never leave us or abandon us or tell us we are unlovable, but will seek to surround us with love that begs a response of love from us. That loving response is what we call faith.

God claims us not as a master claims a slave and not as a conquering king claims a nation. God claims us not as a puppeteer who wishes to direct every movement of our lives but claims us as a loving parent, full of hope and love for his children. Like a parent, God will allow us to learn and grow, succeed and fail, yet all along will love us and want the best for us.

That is one of the blessings of being part of a denomination that baptizes infants. For these tiny, helpless creatures have done nothing to earn their way into heaven. They still have a lifetime ahead of them to learn and to grow, to succeed and to fail, to love and to forgive. They still have a lifetime ahead of them to live by faith, in response to God’s great love for them, a love offered to them at baptism no matter their age. For baptism is less about our response of faith

and more about God’s faithfulness. God claims us and God offers us grace not because we have earned it or deserve it. We are claimed and cleansed and called forth by faith because God is God and God is love.

So our baptisms, even as infants, are not as serene as we would make them out to be.

How many of you remember baptisms when the child or adult had a look of joy on their faces,

excited to be claimed by God through the waters of baptism? How many of you remember baptisms when the child or adult had a look of sheer terror on their faces, or screamed the entire service? My family will tell you I was one of the latter.

We may think of baptism as a serene ritual. Yet in reality baptism is a life-changing, world-changing moment of God’s grace.

In the Gospel of Luke Mary is reminded at her visit from Gabriel, the wonder of the shepherds,

the praise of Simeon and Anna, and the adoration of the magi that her son was no ordinary baby. In the Gospel of Mark the audience is reminded that Jesus is no ordinary man.

Through Jesus’ baptism, God changed all of history. For through Jesus, God changed the way faithful men and women related to God. Through Jesus, God’s Own Son, God made a way for you and me to be in direct, intimate relationship with God Almighty.

Think for a moment about that heavenly rip at Jesus’ baptism. Matthew and Luke proclaimed the heavens were opened. Mark is a lot stronger with his language that the heavens were torn apart, ripped open dramatically, in Greek a form of the word *schitzo* that also forms schism or schizophrenia.

..*Schizo,* is also the same word Mark, Matthew and Luke use to describe that moment on Good Friday when the curtain of the temple is torn in two. It's the same word John uses when the Roman soldiers at the foot of the cross determine not to tear Jesus' garment and divide it between them, but to cast lots for it, instead. It's a word from the prophet Isaiah, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." (Isaiah 63:19)

—adapted from Maxwell Grant “Torn Open, By God” 1-11-15 day1.org

When the heavens were torn apart at Jesus’ baptism and the Temple curtain was torn apart at Jesus’ death, no longer did the faithful have to go through a Priest in order to relate to God.

When explaining this once to a group of teenagers, a biblical scholar asked the teens,

"Get the point? When Jesus was baptized the heavens that separate us from God were ripped open so that now we can get to God. Because of Jesus we have access to God--we can get close to him."

But one young man sitting in the front row, arms crossed, making a fairly obvious display of his disinterest, suddenly perked up and said, "That ain't what it means."

“What?" the Bible scholar said, startled.

"I said that ain't what that means," the teenager repeated. "It means that the heavens were ripped open so that now God can get at us anytime he wants. Now nobody's safe!"

-- Scott Hoezee calvinseminary.edu/thisweek 1-8-12

None of us are safe—from the relentless love of God.

None of us are safe, for God is still reaching out to claim us today, through God’s love and grace, through the water of baptism and the bread and cup of Holy Communion.

Today, the baptismal font is in the front of our sanctuary to remind us that in baptism is where our journeys of faith truly begin. At any age.

Then at the table of Holy Communion we are encouraged along our journey’s path. No matter how much we stumble or how straight is our path.

Today, we remember and give thanks that when we are baptized, as infant, child or adult,

God claims us just as God claimed Jesus, as beloved sons and daughters, not because we have done anything to earn such a claim but because of who we are in the eyes of God.

Through the waters of baptism we are reminded of our identity, of who and whose we are, an identity that has nothing to do with what earthly family we were born into or married into, and has nothing to do with what ministries we are involved in and how we live our faith. God claims us not because we have earned such a claim but because God loves us unconditionally and offers us his grace.

When we respond to God’s grace with faith in Jesus, our actions then are not to earn us a place in heaven, but to respond to God’s love with love, for God and for others; to respond to God’s grace with forgiveness of ourselves and others; to respond to God’s claim by living into our identity as God’s beloved children.

As I think about my identity as a beloved child of God, I often turn to Isaiah 43, which declares:

*“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”*

I don’t remember my baptism, for I was only a few weeks old at the time. Yet on days like today, I remember that I have been baptized, I remember that God knows my name, I remember that I am redeemed, and I give thanks for God’s claim on my life.

Remembering that we are baptized, and being thankful, is only the first step of faith.

Our baptisms are more than just a simple ritual done in worship or in a pool or a stream somewhere. Our baptisms mark us as belonging to God, and in belonging to God, we are called to live by God’s ways. Our baptisms mark us as followers of Jesus, and in claiming our faith,

we are called to take on the mission and message of the one in whose name we are baptized.

Our challenge is to not allow our baptisms to be a one-time event, to be completed and forgotten. Instead our baptisms are our launching pads, so to speak, to be God’s people in the world.

In his catechism, Protestant Reformer Martin Luther wrote, "A truly Christian life is nothing else

than a daily baptism once begun and ever to be continued." I think Martin Luther wanted us to remember each day who we are, and whose we are, and how beloved we are.

--Kate Huey ucc.org sermon seeds 1-10-10

Yet as Rev. Barb Sholis reminds us, “Inevitably, life has a way of "wringing us out," and we forget that God dwells in and among us. We forget our "beloved" identity.

Laurence Hull Stookey labels our forgetfulness "spiritual amnesia" but adds that baptism is what counters our amnesia. The touch of water upon our lives helps us recall our place in the biblical story, and reminds us that God's creative force is still birthing us, claiming us, renewing us.”

--Barbara Sholis in The Christian Century, ’02, found online

In this new year, remember who and whose you are as God’s beloved sons and God’s beloved daughters. Then be open to the ways God continues to reach out to you-claiming you, knowing you, calling you, sending you forth, encouraging you and loving you. We will cover all of these in the next six weeks.

Remember, as you live by faith, you do not live in this world alone. You are baptized into the body of Christ, the church universal, not just one local congregation of one specific denomination.

And remember that you are sent forth in the power of the Holy Spirit. The same power that strengthened Jesus in his ministry.The same power that turned rural fishermen into bold evangelists. The same power that saves the lost and sets the prisoner free. That Holy Spirit power will guide you and will guide me.

Embrace who you are today, in the loving eyes of God. Embrace who you are today, claimed and beloved sons and daughters of God. And imagine the joy of God when you are claimed. Imagine the joy of God when you claim Jesus.

This joy was once expressed in a stage production of Clarence Jordan's Cotton Patch Gospel.

Joanna Adams saw Tom Key play God and described Jesus’ baptism scene and her response with these words:

..Tom stood on a ladder on the stage. The actor playing the recently immersed Jesus stood below him looking up with hope and perhaps a little bit of anxiety in his eyes.  But he needn't have worried.  God speaks in a voice loud enough to be heard all the way down Peachtree Street:  "You are my boy, Jesus.  I am so proud of you!"

I could feel in the marrow of my bones the exuberant love and approval in the actor's voice,

and I believe that something similar happens between God and us in our own baptisms:

"This one is mine!" the Lord exclaims.  "I see my image in her!  Don't you see my image in him?

And here comes my Spirit, my Spirit to sustain and guide as you go about doing what I put you on earth to do."

--As told by Joanna Adams day1.org 1-10-10 God Believes in You

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is the good news proclaimed in the Gospel of Mark.

This is the good news for even you and I today.

God looks and us and claims us, saying, “This one is mine!” Then God sends us forth with God’s own Spirit to live as God’s beloved in the midst of everyday life.

Remember that you are baptized, remember that you are claimed as God’s beloved, and be thankful.

And as we prepare now to move to another sign of God’s grace,

I leave you with this blessing from our baptismal covenant:

The Holy Spirit work within you,

that having been born through water and the Spirit,

you may live as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.

May it be so.