

Jesus, Moody, and Us

By

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Mark 1: 4-11

So John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And the whole Judean region and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

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

In a drawer of my office desk is a hardbound book entitled “Pastoral Record.” I bought it shortly after graduating from seminary as my father--who had also been a Presbyterian minister--acquired the same book early in his career and, in his neat handwriting, kept an account of his 34 years as a pastor. Thus, I purchased one just like it 39 years ago and have maintained it since.

The book has sections for all kinds of pastoral tasks, showing for instance, that including today, I have delivered 1533 sermons, most of them twice on the same day and a few repeats. I have a record of every wedding or funeral I have officiated, each member who joined during one of my pastorates, and every workshop or presentation I offered away from the church. There are sections I never tried to maintain, such as the pages that show pastoral calls made or vacations taken, and a few sections where I have nothing to list, such as the one entitled “Writings Published.” Otherwise, in script not nearly as neat as Dad’s, I have kept track of my ministry.

In the section on baptisms, I checked a few days ago and learned that on 333 occasions I have placed water upon someone’s head and said, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” 62 were believers’ baptisms, when an adult or teenager took that step for her or himself and the rest were infants or children. Only once did a baptismal candidate spit up on me, and ever since, I have positioned infants so that they are facing away from my robe! On 15 occasions, I baptized siblings on the same day — three times involving twins — and on four other days I did so for both a parent and their child at the same service. My home congregation in Columbus, Georgia, was the setting 38 years ago for my first baptism of a family member, a nephew who calls

me “UJ” for “Uncle John.” I will preside at his wedding in April. The only other family baptisms included the joy of officiating at that moment for our four grandchildren.

Thus, of 333 career baptisms, one took place in Georgia, 16 in a Kentucky sanctuary, 127 in my North Carolina pastorate, and 188 for persons related to the Doylestown Church, including three at grandparents’ home due to unusual circumstances, like Covid 19. For those of you who have not kept a running total, that leaves one baptism unaccounted for, and it was unlike all the rest.

John the Baptist would have said that about the event described in today’s second lesson. He had appeared in the wilderness, calling for what Mark describes as “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Baptism did not originate with our faith. Christian baptism has its own aspects that arise from the teachings of Jesus and practices of various denominations, but in the first century, Jews observed something called “proselyte baptism” when persons converting to Judaism would be baptized by immersion. That event could occur in all kinds of bodies of water, as in order of preference, one might be baptized in a small pond or pool of water formed by rain, a larger pond or well, but ideally in what was termed the “living water” of a river, lake, or spring. We don’t know all the places John baptized or his career total, but on the day recalled by our passage, it took place at the Jordan River with a baptismal candidate unlike any other.

As one day Jesus appears at the Jordan to be baptized by John. There is no reaction from the Baptizer in our reading, but in Matthew’s account of the same moment, John objects and says to Jesus, “I need to be baptized by

you and do you come to me?” (3:14) Still, he proceeds and lowers Jesus beneath the water. As he re-surfaces, Jesus “saw the heavens torn apart—an event hoped for by Isaiah in our first lesson amidst different circumstances--and the Holy Spirit descends like a dove, Jesus hears a voice--perhaps the first time his father has spoken audibly to him--who says, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

That moment was quite different from what I heard took place at my baptism 66 years ago, and I suspect that to be true in your case, too. Some of you may have been baptized in a river or in a church using bottled water from the Jordan, yet suspect it did not include a rending of the heavens or a voice from the clouds. Some of you received that water when you were confirmed or at church camp, in a moment that is vivid in memory or recalled only by a black-and-white photo in your baby book. Every baptism is unique, but each one marks the start of a journey.

In Jesus’ case, his baptism would delineate the beginning of his public ministry. Immediately after this scene, Mark reports that the same Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, where he was tested. Afterwards, Jesus calls his first disciples to follow him, and the work starts. For most of us, our baptism didn’t mark a vocational shift, but it set us on a new path even so. Sometimes, that change was clear and enduring, but in other times, the waters of baptism marked the beginning to what might be described as a start-and-stop-and-start-again time of growth.

A few years ago, country singer Carrie Underwood released a hit single entitled “Something in the Water.” It’s possible the lyrics are autobiographical, but whether descriptive of her life or someone else’s, it

tells of one who experienced the power of baptism. The song speaks of one who was going down the wrong path until another introduced her to faith. “So, I followed that preacher man down to the river,” she sang, “and now I’m changed. And now I’m stronger. There must’ve been something in the water. Oh, there must’ve been something in the water.”

The lyrics go on to describe how the impact proved elusive. “Well, I heard what he said,” she goes on, “and I went on my way, didn’t think about it for a couple of days, then it hit me like lightning late one night. I was all out of hope and all out of fight. Couldn’t fight back the tears, so I fell on my knees saying, ‘God, if you’re there, come and rescue me.’” That petition was answered as she concludes, “And now I’m singing along to Amazing Grace, can’t nobody wipe this smile off my face, got joy in my heart, angels on my side...Ever since the day that I believed I am changed, and now I’m stronger. There must be something in the water...”

(Destefano, Chris, Brett James and Carrie Underwood “Something in the Water,” Warner/Chappel Music, 2014).

There is something in the water, and it’s the Holy Spirit that was present in the moment of Jesus’ baptism and every baptism since. As that sacramental event marks the start of a new life, but as we can all attest in our own journeys of faith, the full impact of that gift is still unfolding. For whether we proclaimed the vows in the moment of our baptism, or the promises came from parents presenting us to God, or we have yet to take that step, every life has an ebb and flow in regard to faithfulness. Yet the power of that event and God’s claim upon us never wavers.

In our Presbyterian tradition, we don't re-baptize persons when they join a congregation or if, after a time of spiritual wandering, wish to re-dedicate themselves to God. Theologically, we take that position because the grace of God cannot be lost. Thus, it doesn't matter if the baptism occurred by sprinkling or immersion, as an infant or adult. Whether the one who received the waters of baptism remained fully engaged in a faith community from that time forward or had a period of indifference or actively resisting the call of Christ, the significance of that baptism and the claim of God upon that person remains, too, and thus does not need to be repeated. Some of you may have been re-baptized along the way. If so, rest assured that is perfectly fine.

Still, there is wisdom in occasionally renewing the vows made in baptism, and in a few minutes, we will do just that. The transitional period that we have entered at the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church is the perfect time to reaffirm the core of our Christian tradition and its starting point. So, following the next hymn, I will invite those who wish to do so to stand, reaffirm baptismal vows made last year or decades ago, by you or your parents on your behalf, and profess your faith again. There won't be any water placed upon your head, but as is true of all baptisms, so will that time be uniquely your own and empowered by the Spirit, mark a beginning.

The one baptism I officiated that did not occur in a church or home took place on September 19, 1988. I was fourteen months into my first pastorate when I received a phone call from the local hospital. I don't remember who called me; perhaps it was a volunteer at the hospital or a member of the congregation I was serving. In either case, the message was

brief and the request clear: a 61-year-old patient named Moody Martin was dying. Would I come and baptize him in his hospital bed? I immediately said “yes,” but as I hung up wondered what to do.

My seminary class on sacraments had not covered that kind of situation. My baptismal experience to that point was a grand total of five, four infants--including that nephew--and one adult, but all had occurred inside a Presbyterian sanctuary. Each of those baptisms had been scheduled well ahead of time and approved by Session, thus giving me denominational authority to proceed and time to plan the event. None of those factors would be true with Moody.

Before leaving for the hospital, I did recall learning in a worship class how in our faith tradition, baptism is always a community event and not a private one. Thus, I quickly called an elder from the congregation — a retired farmer named Jack Stofer — and asked if he could accompany me to the hospital. Jack readily agreed, and soon we stood by Moody’s bedside. I wish I could remember all the details of that visit and the story he shared. I probably asked about his health and what the doctors were telling him. I heard about his family, why he had never been baptized before, and what he believed about God. I then took some water from the faucet in his room, offered a prayer, and then three times, moved my hand from a bowl to his head--in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I then ended with prayer, too.

When I opened my eyes, I could see that he was both happy and tired, so a few minutes later, Jack and I left. I stopped by his room the next day, but Moody had been discharged. I never heard from him again, but a few

weeks later saw his obituary in the local paper. It turns out he had been born on Christmas Day in 1926. He had begun his new life.

Every baptism is different, for Jesus, for Moody, and for us. Yet what is true about all of them is that each one marks a beginning. As there is something in that water, and thanks be to God, that something is still there for us.