

January 11, 2009
Beloved
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Mark 1:4-11

John the Baptizer appeared in the wild, preaching a baptism of life-change that leads to forgiveness of sins. People thronged to him from Judea and Jerusalem and, as they confessed their sins, were baptized by him in the Jordan River into a changed life. John wore a camel-hair habit, tied at the waist with a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild field honey.

As he preached he said, "The real action comes next: The star in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will change your life. I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. His baptism—a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit—will change you from the inside out."

At this time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. The moment he came out of the water, he saw the sky split open and God's Spirit, looking like a dove, come down on him. Along with the Spirit, a voice: "You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life."

I bet there is a prayer that virtually every one of us here today has uttered.

T.G.I.F. Thank God It's Friday.

It has become such a common phrase in our lingo, that a restaurant chain stole it for it's name, T.G.I. Friday's.

"Give Me More Friday's" is their motto.

This phrase is based on the belief that people are happier on Friday, the end of the work week, than any other day of the week.

Can you imagine a restaurant that tried to lure you with the words "Give Me More Mondays"?

Probably not.

We talk about: "Monday morning blues," and we sing with the Boomtown Rats: "I Don't Like Mondays" or with Karen Carpenter as she reminds us that "Rainy Days and Mondays, always get you down."

But what if they don't?

Recent research has uncovered that people are not much happier on Fridays than they are on Mondays.

Fact is, our moods do not change very dramatically over the course of the week.

But we remember Fridays as happy days because of the meaning and emotions we attach to Fridays.

Friday is when we're freed from the chores of the work week.
It's when we turn our minds from business to pleasure.
It's when the door to the weekend is thrown wide open.

These are the meanings and emotions we attach to Friday.

Because we believe that Fridays are happy days, we remember them as happy days.

Take a moment to think about this. — **MEANING SHAPES MEMORY.**

Don't believe me — think about this . . .

Nancy might tell you that her wedding day was the happiest day of her life. In fact, it was incredibly stressful, but the meaning of our marriage turns it into a happy memory.

I can tell you that the birth of each of my girls was an absolute joy! But the truth is, it was an absolute misery to watch Nancy suffer through labor, but the meaning of childbirth makes the memory a positive one.

A teenager says that her rejection by a boyfriend was the most crushing blow of her life. In fact, she felt a bit relieved and bounced back quickly. But the meaning of romance makes the breakup a very painful memory.

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to celebrate a Baptism in the River Jordan. When it was over, those had been baptized by immersion in the river all said that the experience was wonderful. The reality was that it was wet, cold and uncomfortable, but the meaning of the sacrament made it deeply moving.

Those statements are all true because — **Meaning shapes memory.**

Professor Charles Areni in The Washington Post (May 26, 2008) argues that

“Mondays are not actually blue, but people persist in the belief that they are.”

Maybe this insight can help us to better understand the significance of what happened to Jesus in the Jordan River.

Last Tuesday we celebrated the Epiphany – Epiphany means to reveal or make known, and as Christians we see this in three particular revelations of Jesus. The coming of the wise men, Jesus Baptism and his first miracle at Cana in Galilee.

Today is the first Sunday after Epiphany and it is the day in the church year called “Baptism of the Lord,” and it gives us an opportunity to remember this event and reflect on its impact.

It’s a perfect example of how meaning shapes memory.

So what do you remember about that day?

John the baptizer appears in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. People from the city of Jerusalem and all Judea flock to him, and are baptized in the river Jordan, confessing their sins (Mark 1:4-5). John helps them to see the errors of their lives and to live in the repentance and forgiveness of God.

This feels very good to them.

John is providing a much-needed spiritual service, but John also reveals that he’s not simply in the purification business. He proclaims,
 “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me ... I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (vv. 7-8).

Think of the emotions that take place at the Jordan river

- There’s gratitude for the gift of forgiveness.
- There’s surprise and shock at the sight of the baptizer’s camel’s hair clothing and his diet of locusts and wild honey (v. 6).
- There’s confusion about the identity of the powerful one who’s coming after John.

All of this changes when Jesus comes on the scene.

Mark tells us that Jesus comes from Nazareth in the Galilee and is baptized by

John in the Jordan, and just as he is coming up out of the water, he sees the heavens torn apart and the Holy Spirit descends on him like a dove. And a voice from heaven says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (vv. 9-11).

This is the meaning of baptism: Jesus is God's Son, the Beloved.

The meaning of baptism is that God accepts Jesus as his Son, and the happiness we feel over this acceptance shapes our entire memory of baptism.

Gone is the mix of emotions that were felt by the people at the Jordan River, replaced by deep joy that Jesus is God's Son, the Beloved. After witnessing his baptism, we don't have to wonder any longer about who Jesus is. We know his true identity.

The very same is true for us, as we remember our own baptism.

Through Baptism, we are connected to the body of Christ — the universal community of Christians that's nothing less than the flesh-and-blood physical presence of Jesus in the world today.

"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" asks the apostle Paul. "If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Romans 6:3, 5).

In this sacrament, we become children of God, no less loved and accepted than Jesus Christ himself.

This is the meaning of baptism: Baptism connects us to Christ. It enables us to die and rise with Jesus. It makes us dead to sin and alive to God (Romans 6:11). It gives us new and everlasting life, and a freshly minted identity as children of a loving Lord.

It's an experience that shapes our memory forever.

We make a mistake, however, if we believe that baptism is always the beginning of a lifetime of perfect bliss.

Think about what happens immediately after the baptism of Jesus — Mark tells us that the Spirit immediately drives Jesus "out into the wilderness," where he is tempted by Satan for 40 days (1:12-13). Then his Galilean ministry begins, and Jesus comes face to face with a man with an unclean spirit, a woman with a fever and a steady stream of people who are sick or possessed by demons (vv.

21-34). So there's no rest for the freshly baptized.

"If I say, 'I was married,' you will likely assume that my wife has died or I am divorced. But if I say, 'I am married,' you will assume I have a wife and that on a certain date I was married and still am. Although it's true and essential to say 'I was baptized,' it is also necessary to assert, 'I am baptized'" (<http://laughingpastor.blogspot.com/>).

More than anything else, baptism marks our birth as Christians. It involves a process that is every bit as wet and messy as the physical birth that brought us into this world, but it is also every bit as permanent. Through baptism, we are identified as children of God who are both loved and lovable, chosen by the Lord to be his people in the world. "The truth, even though I cannot feel it right now," wrote the Dutch priest Henri Nouwen, "is that I am the chosen child of God, precious in God's eyes, called the Beloved from all eternity and held safe in an everlasting embrace."

The chosen child of God. This is not just Jesus ... it is each one of us. Precious. Beloved. Safe in an everlasting embrace. Our true identity.

Make this your memory of baptism.