
Baptism: beyond the waters
Chapel in the Park United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 19:1-7 and Mark 1:4-11

I'm so glad that 2023 is over. But you probably don't yet know me well enough to know why I'm so pleased right now. Let me give you some background. And keep in mind that I am a church geek.

As I'm sure you know, there is a thing called "The Lectionary". The lectionary is a listing of scripture readings appropriate for use in the church. The lectionary was created and continues to be edited by representatives from many Christian denominations. It follows a three year cycle. These three years are creatively labeled ... Year A, B, and C. The basic idea is that we read around the entire Bible in 3 years. We don't get the whole Bible of course, but the intention is that we get the important pieces and narratives over 3 years.

Now, there are four gospels in the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. So why does the lectionary not have a four year cycle? I'm glad you asked.

The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the "synoptic gospels". Synoptic meaning that they look similar. All three of those gospels are stories of the life of Jesus. The stories follow a chronology, each giving us a different version of the life of Jesus. Matthew, Mark and Luke are structured around the life of Jesus.

The gospel of John, however, is very different. The gospel of John was written last, and not surprisingly it focuses more on teachings and theology. Yes, there are stories in John, but they are not chronological. The gospel of John is more about the point of Jesus's life, rather than just telling his story.

As one example, the story of Jesus turning water into wine appears only in John. Which suggests that the point of this story was theological rather than being a reflection of an actual event.

In any case, the lectionary takes good advantage of all this. In general terms (and with many exceptions) in year A the gospel readings are taken from Matthew. In year B

the gospel readings are from Mark. And in year C the gospel readings are taken from Luke. The gospel of John does not get its own year. Instead, the gospel of John is sprinkled throughout every year, with a significant emphasis during Advent and Lent.

So now I'm sure you all know why I am so glad that 2023 is over, right? No? Well, I'm not actually glad to be done 2023. I'm just glad that we have moved beyond year A in the lectionary. Year "B" - the year we are now in - is my favourite year. Because I love the Gospel of Mark. Why, you ask? Well, the simplest example comes from today's reading: The story of the baptism of Jesus.

Consider how Matthew and Mark compare. The stories in Matthew and in Mark are quite similar, of course. But in Matthew's baptism, when Jesus emerges from the water, the voice says, "This is my son, the beloved". In Mark, as we just read, the voice says, "You are my son, the beloved". Is that a big difference? For me, yes. Because Mark is just telling the story. Matthew is explaining the story. In Matthew, the voice is directed at the crowd, whereas in Mark, the voice is directed to Jesus. And in general, the gospel of Mark just tells us a story. Mark is terse. Mark is direct.

Who here remembers the story where Jesus was in the wilderness, and he was tempted by the devil. How many times was Jesus tempted? If you just said "3" then you are thinking of the story in Matthew or Luke. In Matthew, we hear about three very specific temptations, and we even get a record of a dialog between Jesus and the devil. Whereas in Mark, Jesus's temptation in the wilderness is only 2 short verses. In Mark, the entire story is, "And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." That's it. And then we are on to the next story. I like that! Just the story without an explanation.

I like to think of these differences between the gospels in terms of different types of movies. If the Gospel of Matthew was a movie, it would be a big Hollywood blockbuster. The audio and video would be exceptional. The production values would be massive. The continuity between scenes - flawless. And the narrative elements would be woven together into a coherent and inviting story. We would have no trouble imagining what message the director is trying to get across. Matthew contains the sort of catchy

quotes you might find on bumper stickers. After watching Matthew the movie, you might even expect to purchase souvenirs on the way out of the theatre. Matthew is a complete marketing package. Matthew the movie is what the movie industry calls a franchise. And as an added bonus, Matthew does not upset the status quo too much.

In contrast, if the Gospel of Mark was a movie it would be a documentary made using a jiggly hand-held camera. It might even be in black-and-white. The editing would be done with little effort. The continuity between scenes - virtually absent. And the plot line would not really be explained.

In Mark, we know who the characters are, and we see the action. But we're just not sure we are getting the point that the director had in mind. In the gospel of Mark, the disciples themselves say they "don't get it" many times. The gospel of Mark gives us a lot of space to imagine missing details. Which for me at least means that the gospel of Mark more easily allows us to find ourselves in the story.

Those differences between Mark and Matthew shouldn't really surprise us too much. All of the written gospel records came from oral stories after all. Matthew was written after Mark and the oral stories probably became more jelled as time went on. And the authors of Matthew and Mark were different people - different directors - who had their own characteristic styles. They each had their own message to convey.

Even I will admit that in some ways Matthew is more compelling. We are drawn to narrative. And we can relate more easily to characters who say and do things. And yet, I really prefer to read Mark. Mark is in some ways more of an "amateur" production - it is unpolished, untouched, or at least, less polished and less touched. And it is for that very reason more pure, more raw, more organic than Matthew. It is a more original form of the Jesus stories. Mark is also much more unsettling to the status quo. And as another bonus, Mark leaves us with a lot of room for mystery and uncertainty.

Anyway, I look forward to discovering the beauty and openness of Mark with you all this year. Do yourself a favour and read Mark in one sitting - it's only 16 short chapters. And be open to the rawness and power of the story of Jesus as told by Mark.

Our story today from Acts is also quite interesting. Paul comes upon an early Christian community and discovers that the people were baptized, but did not receive the

spirit. They had participated in the right ritual, and yet had missed the point of the ritual. Does that sound strange to us? Or does that sound familiar? How often do we engage in a particular action or ritual, and yet afterwards feel that we have somehow missed the point of the action?

In reflecting on baptism at the time of Jesus, John Petty says, “Jerusalem was a company town. Some of the inhabitants literally lived in the shadow of the temple, and thousands worked there. The temple had its own tradition-approved mechanisms for repentance and dealing with sin. Institutional and traditional religion, always expert at sin, had sin covered. The Lord God, however, was not operating through the existing institutional channel of the temple, but rather, the 'voice' directed the people to the uncharted territory of the wilderness. The people went there to confess their sins and not to the temple. In other words, [the people] walked right by where they were supposed to go and went instead to see a prophetic preacher out in the middle of nowhere.”

Incidentally, if you don't like the word repentance, feel free to use a different word. Use another word that speaks to your deepest longing ... perhaps redemption, salvation, freedom, inner peace. Over coffee time I'd love to hear what word you prefer. I will continue here using the traditional word ... salvation.

And yet, I wonder. Did the people fail to find salvation in the temple because the temple was not providing the right activities and services? Or did the people fail to find salvation in the temple because they were looking for the wrong thing altogether. And how many people went to John for baptism, participated, and yet walked away dejected, heads down. Because they hadn't felt the spirit of salvation from John either.

Perhaps salvation does not come in a nice package. Perhaps salvation does not come in an instant. Perhaps salvation isn't an event at all, but a process. Perhaps the expectation of receiving the spirit at baptism is not about being “fixed” in the blink of an eye. But rather, that receiving the spirit is the beginning a journey with the spirit - a journey that will last a lifetime. For Jesus, his baptism was literally the beginning of his journey - his public ministry. The Gospel of Mark begins when Jesus steps into the water. And Jesus's ministry begins when Jesus steps out of the water. Perhaps it's not so different for us?

Is baptism a quick event, or is baptism the start of a journey? Baptism - like all sacraments, and like life itself, is a case where to a large extent, you get out what you put in. I believe that baptism is best understood as the start of a journey. These fingers are not magic, and the water we use in baptism here is only Toronto tap water. However, if we are open to the presence of the spirit, baptism can be transformative.

In the words of Teri Peterson, “The Spirit changes things - brings life, but also chaos. There are cacophony and unmediated communication, breath and wind and flame and water, all of which both create and destroy. This is what happens in baptism, of course. Gone is the predictable tradition we've carefully built up to control our experience of God, ... [in] its place is possibility, calling out in unexpected ways through strange voices. Water needs only the smallest crack to seep in, and the Spirit seeps in with those baptismal waters.”

I'm sure we have all seen evidence of the power of water. Allow water to build up in a small crack in your driveway, and after one winter you will have a much larger crack. Or consider the river gorge where we find Niagara Falls. The edge of the falls as you may know, has moved. In the past 12,000 years the edge of the falls has moved about 11 km. And is currently moving at a rate of about 30 cm per year. Water is that powerful. Water can accomplish great things - over time.

And the waters of baptism can accomplish great things in our own lives too - over time. When we are touched by the spirit we are changed. Some of us can share stories of rapid change, and other of us would share stories about being slowly changed over time, but the spirit brings change. Water brings change. Baptism brings change. Baptism isn't about the water itself. Baptism is about what is beyond the waters. Faith and life. Connection and community.

Anything meaningful in life takes time. Even when we have “instant” change, it takes time for that change to percolate into our sense of self. And acceptance of our own baptism can take a lifetime. That's why many people - good, faithful church people - if we are honest - understand that we don't completely understand sacraments like baptism and communion. And we don't need to. We - as human beings - are all works in progress. Why would we expect faith to be any different.

For most of us, faith is not a magic moment that happens one day. Faith is a long, slow, exciting process that takes as long as it needs to take. And like any process, there are ups and downs along the way. Of course there are! I am a very thoughtful person, seminary-trained, who has been in church my whole life. And my faith is still growing and developing. I'll let you know if I ever think I have all the answers. But don't hold your breath for that.

And that's good news. We do not have to be perfect. We just have to see life and faith as a journey, and to remember that we have all been blessed with a superpower that is even better than X-ray vision. We have the superpower of having the ability to change our own minds. And we have another superpower too - each other. This place - this church - this community of faith can be our support network. We are all in this together, and God is in our midst. What more do we need?

A new year awaits us all. What do you want to do this year? Who do you want to be this year? In what ways do you want to grow? Let us all step out of the baptismal waters and continue our own journey of faith together. We have the spirit. We have each other. We have enough.

Amen.