

*A sermon preached by Rev. Todd Leach at
Clarence Presbyterian Church on June 6, 2021.*

Baptized into Messiness

Mark 1:4-11

I want to thank my friend and colleague in ministry, Rev. Dr. Hall for inviting me to the pulpit of Clarence Presbyterian Church, and to the congregation, I thank you for the warm welcome. When Greg reached out to me he shared there would be a baptism in the (later) service, which led me ponder Christ's own baptism. I invite you to join me as we explore more about God's love as Jesus, through baptism, chooses to enter the messiness of his people.

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If Jesus was truly looking for messiness, he surely found it in John the Baptist. If we close our eyes and listen to Mark's description of the baptizer, we can nearly smell him: clothed with his soaking wet camel hair, the leather belt holding in some of the aroma. Though as some people explore dining on the current Brood X cicada, John's diet is now less odd than it once seemed. It was this John who was offering a baptism new to the holy culture – a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And despite himself, he had an enormous following. The idea of spiritual cleansing was not new to the Jewish custom, but the only type of once and done cleansings were for Gentiles who converted to Judaism. John's cleansing was different, it was for the Gentile seekers and those born into the Hebrew faith. His baptism dealt with the messiness of every life as people came with their confessions, having their sins washed away by the river waters.

So John baptized washing away sins. And Jesus entered the waters of the Jordan to be baptized by John. And there lies the age-old question: Why was Jesus, who had no sin, baptized by John who baptized for the forgiveness of sins? What did baptism do to Jesus? This is a good question that has been pondered through the ages, and we have had some time to come up with some good answers. But today I am interested in a different question: Not "What did baptism do to Jesus?" but instead, "What did Jesus do to baptism?" Something happened in those waters.

Through John's baptism, the waters of the Jordan had symbolically washed away the sins of those baptized. Symbolically, then, one could argue that the sins remained in the waters. As Jesus entered the Jordan and was dipped in the waters, the waters themselves were cleansed – Jesus had taken on the sins of those who had entered before him, and he would take on the sins of all humanity who follows him. In John's baptism, one confesses sins and emerges from the water as a cleaner self. In Christ's baptism, one dies to the old self and emerges from the waters as a new self.

In the Jordan, as John raises him from the waters, Mark's gospel tells that Jesus looks up to see the heavens torn apart. Karl Barth explains this passage as the "astonishing claim that God does not will to remain hidden in the heights of heaven but descends to the depths of earthly life in order to be seen and heard by us finite creatures." The heavens were torn apart because God had broken into the world, ushering God's kingdom into the world. The veil of heaven was torn away and God was among the people, and in baptism Jesus chose to identify with those gathered sinners. God chose not to reveal God's-self inside the holy of holies, nor even within the walls of the temple. Not even within the walls of the holy city, Jerusalem. In Jesus Christ, God was revealed in the wilderness, outside the walls, and not among the chief priests and pious faithful, but among a gathered group of sinners. Jesus raised from the waters and saw the heaven's torn apart.

Before Jesus saw the heaven's torn apart at his baptism, sometime before, God looked from heaven and saw his creation torn apart. Now, from a new vantage point among humanity, dripping wet from his baptism, Jesus saw the tears causing division among people: tears between people and God, tears between people and people. Jesus spends his life in the messiness of healing and redeeming those tears – piecing together what others intend to remain apart.

In our own baptism, having passed through the waters, through the gift of the Spirit you and I have received the vision of Christ, the ability to see as Christ sees - however overwhelming and scary that may be. Jesus cleansed the waters and rising to new life from those waters, we can see what God sees. We can bear witness to the good news of God's kingdom breaking in to our kingdoms. We see the heavens torn open when we witness the hungry being fed, when the broken are healed, when poverty is stricken down by justice and when hope replaces despair and fears are trumped with peace. We can see the heavens open, the veil hiding God is torn away.

This same vision, though, also enables us to see the brokenness in our world: the messiness which exists on both sides of our baptismal waters. We were reminded of the messiness in this week's centennial anniversary of the Tulsa massacre. And in a much more recent event, in the one year anniversary of the George Floyd murder. Rising from our own baptism waters we see the places where the kingdom has yet to break in.

Upon returning home from my worst day of teaching in my middle school career, I turned on the local news to see media vans parked in a convenient store with my school pictured in the background. Apparently, earlier in the day some delinquent teenager entered the store only to physically assault the now bruised and battered store clerk. It was an act of unjustified cruelty. The event supported the perception and reputation of my school, but we were more than that depiction.

Earlier in the morning I pulled Marcus* into my empty classroom to share some tough news with him. Marcus, an eighth grader, had recently reentered school after completing an inpatient drug rehab program, as a fourteen year old. He was on track and determined to change his young life. He was not the best student but was the brightest student I had the privilege to teach. Although broken, messy, he was an inspiration. A few days prior he had confided in me that his mother continued to deal drugs out of his home, which is what led him to his own addiction. I mistakenly promised that I would help him find his father, and somehow I did. Via a brief phone call I shared with his father how Marcus is now clean and focused in school. And went on to explain how he needs a stable home and how he hopes to live with his father, for a second chance at a new life as a young teenager. There was a long pause, followed by a voice of remorse. His father apologetically explained he was not in a position to take his son into his home nor his life.

I was my worst day because this was the news I had to share with Marcus. So I did and although his eyes glistened, with a stoic face Marcus graciously thanked me for my efforts and I led him back to his class.

It was the next morning I learned Marcus had left school between classes the prior day. It was Marcus who assaulted that store clerk. So I had two bad days in a row. Everything about

what he did that afternoon was wrong. He assaulted an innocent person with no justification. He deserved the punishment he received. Yet, there was so much more to Marcus and more to his young story than that 15 second news clip about some thug in the neighborhood.

I was baptized by fire that first year of teaching, teaching in a culture outside of my own, and my eyes were opened to things I had never noticed before: One of my honor students was pulled over and frisked because he was riding his bike on the sidewalk instead of the street. His mother had told him it was safer to ride the sidewalk. One of my students beat the odds and earned a scholarship to a small private school. He quit during the second semester. He was one of only a few persons of color on campus and he tired of security knocking on his door every time something came up missing in the dormitory. Then there was the education system itself. I learned quickly that the system's care did not focus on the children, yet somehow expected the children to focus on it. These are only a couple of a great number of stories. Messy stories from only one classroom, in only one school, in only one city.

Jesus was baptized by John and when he came up out of the water he saw the heavens torn apart. Jesus entered the messiness of God's children, leading us to enter the same messiness. God had looked down on his creation and saw the world torn apart. In Christ on that day, Christ redefined baptism: In his baptism he claimed us and in our baptism, he claimed us again. As we are lifted daily from our everlasting baptismal waters and while the Spirit descends upon us, with Christ's vision we should look within ourselves as we look to the world around us, and like the heavens, our hearts should be torn. And like the one who came before us, we shall enter the messiness of life to witness the kingdom breaking into our world.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

*Student's name has been changed.