

Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:4-11

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ
Sunday, January 11, 2009
Baptism of Our Lord

Taking a Back Seat to Jesus

In the transition between his prologue and text, Mark quotes from the prophecies of Malachi and Isaiah as historical connections with the coming of John the Baptist, who will then introduce then Jesus Christ. These prophecies speak of the roles of both John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. John is to be a wilderness preacher, preparing the way for the coming of Christ by encouraging people to straighten out their lives. Jesus, in turn, will come, according to the prophets, as Judge in His divine power and as our Deliverer.

Mark's version of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus seems to be lacking in substance. Even though Mark understands John the Baptist is the messenger of Jesus, he conveys that image with only a few details, as is Mark's way. Mark shows little interest in explaining the preaching of John the Baptist or in distinguishing between the identities of John and his relative, Jesus.

John the Baptist accepts his role as the messenger of Christ. Every detail of John's life points toward that great moment when he will select a figure out of the crowd and announce, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Most of us have difficulty identifying with John the Baptist. He seems to have no desire in self-interest. Nor does the glamour of being Number One appeal to him, though it seems to continue to plague many of us. Think about this for a moment. If you were to be asked to choose one thing to symbolize our generation, what would it be? A flag, a

Cross, a missile, a television, a dollar sign, an oil barrel, a handgun, an automobile, a peace symbol? David McKenna, a Biblical scholar suggests his choice may be the sight of an index finger pointed in the air and accompanied by the chant, “We’re Number One!” This symbol, of course, comes mainly from the world of sports, where winning comes dangerously close to being idolized. More than a game is at stake in this symbol.

No wonder John the Baptist makes us uncomfortable. He has every opportunity to be Number One. Luke tells us John is conceived by a miracle, announced by Gabriel the archangel, and filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother’s womb. John the Baptist also has the preparation to be Number One. Scholars tell us John is a member of the Nazarites, or the Essenes, or the Qumran society. Each group is known for its rigid disciplines, such as eating no meat and drinking no wine. John has the image to go with those disciplines. He appears in a hair-shirt tied down with a leather belt, and his diet consists mostly of locusts and wild honey. This description makes it sound as though John the Baptist could easily fit into a Survivor scenario. What a character! Imagine, if you can, wild flame-like hair, steely eyes, chiseled face, and a wiry body wound as tightly as a coiled spring. What an image; fitting for a prophet and magnetic with a crowd! John the Baptist seems perfect for a media age when style is so important.

Though John the Baptist seems unforgettable, he has the substance to match his lifestyle. True to his prophetic status, John preaches social justice as the product of repentance. When the Pharisees come out to the wilderness to criticize his preaching, he meets them with the scathing accusation, “Brood

of Vipers!” When the tax collectors appear, he calls upon them to be honest; and to the soldiers in the crowd, he preaches mercy.

Not only is John the Baptist born to be great and prepared to lead, but he also has the success to be Number One. Peter is so impressed with the crowds who come out to hear John the Baptist that he tells Mark all the people of the country of Judea and all the people of Jerusalem come to hear John and respond to his message. How many is “all”? Scholars estimate as many as 300,000 converts are baptized by John without advertising, stadiums, amplifiers, or satellites. That is only how many become believers; many more than the converts are also there to hear him! John the Baptist is to be recognized as one of the more successful preachers of all time!

Flattery often follows success. When John’s fame peaks, the rumor spreads that he is the Christ. John does not stop for even a moment to bask in the reflection of this false impression. He immediately and directly answers them. Never forgetting his prophetic call, John tells them he is not the Christ. John repeats the words of the prophet who identifies his special role in the kingdom of God, “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’.” With that sincere pronouncement, the man who is born, prepared, and groomed to be Number One steps aside so that Jesus Christ, and He alone, can be lifted up. John the Baptist illustrates to us what it means to be second to Jesus Christ.

To be second, you are to have a sense of history. John the Baptist understands his current role in connection with the past and the future of the kingdom of God. Even though he has all the qualifications for being first, he

does not give in to the temptation of assuming that no one contributed anything to the kingdom before he came and no one will contribute anything after he leaves.

To be second, you are to be submissive. John the Baptist resists his own desires and submits himself to the greatness of Jesus Christ. Imagine being born, prepared, and applauded for one moment when you stand on the banks of the River Jordan and shout, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

To be second, you are to be self-sacrificing. John the Baptist finds his joy in the glory of Christ by giving up his self-serving right to happiness. If we look ahead at John 3, we find the followers of John the Baptist are jealous because Christ is baptizing in what appears to be competition with John. John’s response to them should go down in history as in the spirit of being second. He again reminds his followers he is not the Christ and is sent to prepare the way. He now informs them his work is finished and he will get out of Christ’s way. John declares, “This joy of mine is fulfilled. Christ must increase, but I must decrease.”

John’s original message points to the coming of God or to a heavenly savior figure such as the Son of Man. Looking back, early Christianity, including Mark, understood the promise as referring to Jesus, and made John into the messenger of Christ. In Mark, John has no independent message; his only function is to proclaim Christ’s coming.

Mark says nothing about Bethlehem or of Jesus birth; throughout Mark's Gospel, Jesus is the Nazarene from Galilee. According to Mark, John the Baptist is unaware of Jesus' identity, though the reader knows. Also, there is no conversation between John and Jesus. John is baptizing for the forgiveness of sins. Mark's first picture of Jesus shows Him in solidarity with sinful human beings, being baptized along with them without any word of explanation. Mark does not seem to think it is necessary to explain, Jesus is not a sinner.

For Mark, what is important in the baptism is less the relationship between John and Jesus than the revelation of Jesus being God's Son. The baptism of Jesus provides the occasion for the revealing of Christ's identity which, in turn, begins Jesus' journey into the wilderness and His ministry. The baptism becomes the setting in which the revelation occurs. Because Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist, Christ is clearly identified in terms of Israel's prophetic history. The revelation of Jesus as God's Son marks Him as someone much greater than any of Israel's prophets.

The opening of the heavens is important because the Spirit descending indicates a divine revelation is coming. Whatever Mark understands by the Spirit, he clearly understands it is connected with the very presence of God. The climax is hearing God's voice.

The heavenly vision of the Spirit descending may have only been seen by Christ and the reader. The voice of God speaks only to Christ, "You are My Son." Mark does not give any indication as to when Jesus becomes Son of God. He simply declares Jesus is the Son of God through the voice of God.

Throughout Mark's Gospel, people struggle to understand what Jesus' words and actions mean, to know whose power stands behind Jesus healings, to figure out what the parables mean, and to question how Christ can be the Messiah, and also undergo suffering and even crucifixion. Parts of God's revelation remain concealed.

The story of John the Baptist does not end here. When John says of Christ, "He must increase, but I must decrease" in John 3:30, he does not know he will be imprisoned and executed. Even after John is jailed by Herod for telling the truth about the king's sin, John has his own moments of self-doubt. In the depressing setting of his dungeon, John begins to have second thoughts about being second: Is this the way my life will end? Have I been misled? Is it worth it?

John actually sends one of his own followers to Jesus with a question of honest doubt, "Are You the Coming One or do we look for another?" Jesus' response is recorded in Luke 7:22-23 and reads like a code between brothers. Jesus reinforces John's faith through hard evidence. John can then go to his death knowing his role as a messenger is infinitely meaningful to God's kingdom and his decision to submit to the Christ by being second is definitely worthwhile. In His own preaching, Jesus honors John by telling His disciples, "Among those born of women, there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist."

By design, Mark brings a man with a common name from a common town to participate in a common experience, God with us. Of course, Jesus does

not need to be baptized for His sins, but Mark puts the event in such a sequence with Christ's common name and common town that the baptism becomes an experience in which He shares our common humanity. Mark gives us a lesson for leadership. Mark is aware that his case for Jesus as the Servant Leader begins with the evidence that Christ is on our level, beside us, and sharing our experiences.

God's anointing of Jesus comes in a way which brings us to our knees. No sooner does the thundering violence split the heavens in an awesome show of God's power than His Spirit takes the form of a dove to settle with a gentle flutter on Jesus. Christ is anointed as the One who comes, neither by might nor power, but by the tender Spirit of the Lord.

As we see with John the Baptist, the man and the message are one. John preaches repentance unto the remission of sins. He can only prepare the way. But Jesus Christ, common of person and gentle of Spirit, is anointed by God the Father as the Servant who will be made sin "for" the forgiveness of sins.

God's affirmation follows the anointing: "Then a voice came from heaven, 'You are My Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'." All we need to know about our relationships with God and with each other is summed up in this declaration. God affirms His Son by saying, "I claim You, I love You, I am proud of You." How simple! How basic: to belong, to be loved, to be praised! Nothing more is needed in our relationship with God, our families, and with each other.

Our lesson is simple. God not only anoints Jesus for service, but gives to His Son the strengths of identity, security, and confidence. Jesus' credentials now include the affirmation of God the Father to go along with the announcement of John the Baptist.

Mark's story of Jesus' baptism with its emphasis on revealing the unique identity of Jesus as Son of God scarcely serves as an example for Christian baptism. Yet John the Baptist's earlier statement, "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit," gives us the connection between Jesus' baptism and Christian baptism. Jesus' bringing of the Spirit enables people to be baptized into the faith community called into existence by that Spirit.

As believers and members of this faith community, we too are called by Christ to follow His path, to serve Him and to proclaim His Gospel to others in our daily lives. We are not called to be Number One. We are called to follow. Our church mission statement lists the ways in which we can do this. We talk about these ways in worship, in committees, in Bible studies, in our many activities, and in conversation. We are asked to live Christ-like lives. Putting God first in our lives and serving God are our first priorities. By doing this, yes, we take a back seat to Jesus. That is what serving God is about. May we each answer Christ's call to serve Him by reaching out to others and to each other in whatever ways we are able. May we each use the opportunities God gives us to live, love, and serve our Lord. Amen.