

First Sunday in Lent February 21 2021

Mark 1:9-15

Water is a powerful and important thing.

It makes up 60% or so of our bodies. About 71% of the earth is covered in water.

With enough force it can be used to cut through metal and in nature it will wear wear through rock over time.

You don't have to tell anyone here in Iowa or down in the South about the destructive power of water. Even a thin layer of frozen water can make roads impassable, burst pipes can ruin homes, flood waters can carry them away, water driven by the wind of a derecho or hurricane can work its way in anywhere.

Yet, without water, we will die after three days. Crops won't grow. Life cannot exist.

Water is a powerful and important thing.

And it is amazing what God does with water.

Salvation through the waters is a common theme in the Scriptures and in all three of our lessons today. We will hear them echoed again in our baptismal liturgy.

Through the waters of the flood God delivered Noah and his family. The Israelites pass through the waters of the Red Sea, out of slavery into freedom. At the River Jordan the boundary between wilderness and the promised land, John baptized Jesus, who was then anointed with the Holy Spirit.

Is it any wonder that God acts through baptism- water and the word- which is more than just a washing to get the filth off our bodies, as Paul reminds us?

Even for Jesus. As he is coming up out of the water the heavens are schismed in two and the Holy Spirit lands on him and the voice from heaven declares, “you are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

That same Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness. The word used literally means that he is thrown there. What is it about those words from the rent open sky that drives Jesus into the wilderness? That throws him there.

Perhaps it is because Jesus encounters his full identity in those waters, Son of God, beloved, with whom God is well pleased... and it throws him not for a loop, but out of himself, into the wilderness to struggle with what that means for him... for the world.

What does it mean that Jesus is thrown into the wilderness, that he doesn't choose it? What are we to make of the testing, which lasts 40 days, which, even if not literal, is biblical shorthand for a long time?

When those days are over, the Jesus who enters Galilee is clear about who he is and what he is called to do. His is clear about his identity.

But it didn't come quickly, did it? Just like our own identity doesn't come quickly, all in a flash, but over time. Surely there are things that center us, root us in who we are. For Brooklyn, baptized today, it is child of Jason and Kim, beloved sibling of Westin and Kylin. But the particularities of that identity, that grow up out of that root take time. A little longer than 40 days.

The root of Jesus' identity, Son of God, beloved- is what throws him into the wilderness. He is made into something new, at least in his own understanding. And it takes time to figure that out. Even then, it is tempting for Jesus to listen to what the world wants. To live how the world defines him. That is the voice of the Tempter, Satan. We aren't told in Mark what Satan wants, but there is one other point in Mark's story where he re-appears- Just before last week's text on the Transfiguration. When Peter has declared Jesus as Messiah and Jesus has predicted his being turned over to the authorities and killed. Peter pulls Jesus aside and basically says, God forbid this should happen. The Messiah is not about being arrested and dying shamefully on a cross, a sign of rejection and weakness, a common criminal. No, the Messiah is about strength, political and military power and might. The forceful taking of the true power of God in the world! Getting in the face of the world and showing it who is the boss.

This is the identity the world is trying to place on Jesus. What he is tempted by in the wilderness. But Jesus' response to Peter, "Get behind me Satan, for you are setting your mind on earthly things, not heavenly things!" Is the same rejection he gave to Satan in the wilderness. My identity rests in my Abba, my Father, not in the world and not in you. The world does not define me, God does.

One of my colleagues talked about this text from Mark in terms of three scenes, ones that flash across the screen of our mind in quick succession. The baptism and giving of identity, the wilderness and living into what that identity means- struggling with it, Galilee and living out that identity with his proclamation.

These scenes describe our life.

Baptism, in these waters, we are changed, thrown into a new creation, and it can take some time to figure out what that means totally. But this core identity as God's beloved, claimed by God in the ultimate act of love in Jesus Christ on the cross, this is what roots the rest of our lives- against all the temptations of the world to come.

Baptism is commissioning, not fire insurance. It is a giving of identity, the fullness of which takes some time to discern, but which will lead to lives of proclamation. A focus on heavenly things, not earthly things. Our reading of Paul's letter to the Galatians will help us think about that proclamation and living more.

Water is a powerful and important thing. And it is amazing what God does with water.

We will see that this morning, as we bear witness to the baptism of Brooklyn and Kim.

In Brooklyn, we see the planting of the seed of her identity as beloved child of God. Who after her washing in these waters and the word will be a new creation. A new Brooklyn! And who we will watch eagerly, with her parents Jason and Kim, to see what gifts the Spirit has given her. To see what will grow from that root of her identity as one of God's beloved. To see how she will discern what that identity means. To see what her life will proclaim.

In Kim, we see the reality that the Holy Spirit has already been at work. Through her friends in junior high, her grandparents, and her husband, Jason and his family. She has already been called and gathered by that Spirit who settles on Jesus. In these waters she too will receive that indelible sign of the reality of

God's claim on her and her life. The one to which Martin Luther clung when his world was shaken around him. "I am a baptized child of God." We will watch eagerly as she begins to discern where the Spirit has thrown her, how this identity as beloved child of God, one with whom God is well pleased, will mesh with her vocations as mother, wife, friend. To see what will grow from the root of her identity as one of God's beloved. To see how she will discern what that identity means. To see what her life will proclaim.

Beloved of God, water is a powerful and important thing. And it is amazing what God can do with water.

As we celebrate with Jason, Kim, Brooklyn and their family as they come to this font, for the washing of water and the word. May we take a moment to remember our own washing. That moment when we came up out of the water- the heavens may not have been ripped in two, but we heard those same words- you are a child of God, beloved. Take a moment and trace that cross on your forehead, the one that lay beneath the ashes this past Wednesday. The one that never goes away. The indelible promise of God that we are claimed and loved.

May we be inspired to continue to discern what that identity means in our lives.

And let us trust the message that through that water and the word and in us and our living out of our identity, our proclamation- the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near.

Thanks be to God!