

# Coming Clean

Mark 1:4-11

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John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

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Last week, I mentioned how the first few weeks of Christmas will give you theological whiplash. Two weeks ago, we were celebrating the birth of the Christ child and today we are thirty years later, looking at the baptism of Jesus.

Today we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord Sunday and Christians all over the world will pause to remember their baptism.

Baptism is a powerful force in the life of a Christian for *two* reasons. It is something we share in common. Christians all over the world can say that they were baptized in Christ. You met a Catholic in Ireland. He was baptized. You met a Pentecostal in Nigeria. She was baptized. The second reason is that Baptism is a powerful force that takes us back to the basics.

How are you doing with those New Year's resolutions? Have you lost any weight, exercised more or improved your diet? Eight days into the new year and I can imagine that most of us have all ready reverted back to the way of life we had hoped to change. You see the problem is that most of the time we are not only reluctant to change, we fight it!

So what is that we believe about water is so central to our Christian faith? It is important because we believe that baptism is a sign of change! A change that goes far beyond any New Year's Resolutions what we might make.

You and I know the water. All of God's children know the water. We share by our faith this common symbol, this initiation, this rite, this power of God over the deep and often raging chaos of life. We know water! All over the world Baptism unites us.

Let's take a look at our Lord's Baptism and what it tells us about the three spiritual R's:

**The first "R" is repentance.** Briefly, repentance means "to change your mind or to get a new mind" with regard to something in your life. You decide to turn away from it. You decide to "reform." perhaps you made some decisions to "reform" when the New Year came. You decided to give up being a "couch potato" and begin an exercise program. Or maybe you decided to stop smoking or eating or surfing the net.

Whatever your reform intentions were all about, you discover how difficult self-reform is. All of us have either dealt with addictions or have people in our lives we love a lot who have dealt with or are now dealing with addictions. One of the most agonizing things in an addict's life is the horrible sense of recognition within that they simply do not have power over the thing that is wrecking their life.

When you are trying to reform, when you acknowledge the need to change and are ready to turn away from the old, you qualify for John's baptism. That is you are ready to make the change. The problem is this. You are going to change in principle but have no power to change in fact!

A dear friend, who is a recovering alcoholic said to me, "If I heard once, I heard a million times that I needed to 'change' -- as though I didn't know that. I decided to change almost every night of my drinking life. I would finish my bottle with the absolute promise to myself that the next day would be different. It would be a 'new' day. And it never was."

"I have baptized you with water," John said, "But he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." In other words, John asked for a promise to change while Jesus would give the power to change.

Baptism for a Christian is the spiritual equivalent of a Genesis day one. It is a "brand spanking new" day. The literal sense for the verb "to baptize" means "to immerse or place fully into". This sense is reflected in Second Corinthians 5:17, "... if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see; everything has become new!"

My recovering friend said that his new day came when he quit fighting his addiction in his own strength and made a fresh commitment to give God the controls for his life. "It may be weird," he said, but it's like I handed over the remote." [Not weird at all if you know men and their remotes!] When he quit struggling with the notion of reforming his life for good, he received enough strength to have a brand new day -- every day -- one day at a time. "Sufficient unto the day is the trouble thereof, Jesus said.

Jesus baptizes us with the Holy Spirit -- or in other words -- places us in the Spirit who can give power from within instead of simply pressure from without.

**The second is righteousness.** Righteousness is baptism's fruit. Righteousness is right living! It is putting our beliefs into action. While beliefs are important, what we actually do is more important! We are called to live out our baptism in the world through our actions.

It is like the story of Father Damien from the 1800's. He was a missionary to Hawaii planting churches on the island of Molokai. Being a kind of Apostle Paul to that part of the world, he planted several churches on the main part of the island, but then he discovered another part that nobody ever went to. It's a small Peninsula that juts out north from the island and is separated from the mainland by an almost sheer cliff 2,000-3,000 feet high. The only way to get to that peninsula is to jump off the cliff or go by boat in the open ocean. That deserted peninsula was where the Hawaiians abandoned all their lepers. If you got leprosy in Hawaii, you were taken to this peninsula and abandoned. And Father Damien felt a call to the people there who had been cast off, outcasts removed from society. And he worked there just as he had done on the rest of the island. He built a church with his own hands and helped them build a society - even helping them build houses for themselves - and he lived among them and sought to humbly serve them in any way he could. One day, after he had been there for about 15 years, he was cooking a meal and boiling some water when he spilled the water and it hit his foot. And he realized that there was no pain when it hit. So he tried again. He purposely poured the boiling water on his foot, and there was no pain. That could only mean one thing. He now had leprosy. The next Sunday in church as he began to lead the people in worship, he didn't give his normal greeting. You see, every Sunday he would start, "My fellow believers." But this Sunday he began, "My fellow lepers." He had in every way become one of them; even taking upon himself their greatest pain.

**Repentance. Righteousness. The third R is revelation.** The beginning of Jesus' public ministry happens at the waters of the Jordan. But it's not just the beginning of Jesus' public ministry; there is something else at work in the water. This is God's startling and awe filled punctuation. This is God's sudden bolt of lightning upon the world. Twice in Mark's gospel the word "torn," with a dramatic and active sense is used. The first "tearing" occurs as Jesus rises from the waters of baptism and the second is at the end of Mark's Gospel as the temple curtain is rent. The first event presents the breaking in of the kingdom of heaven and the second the tearing away of the religious barrier between God and humanity. It is as if Mark is saying God has to rip open the skies and change the course of human behavior and rip apart the human barrier of sin that separates us. God has to do it in a sudden and violent way or else we are lost.

Another way to look at this is to ask this question, "When did Jesus become the Christ?" Theologians have argued for centuries about this basic question. The historic Jesus becomes the salvific Christ, but when? I believe this journey toward full revelation started at his baptism!

Sarah Jo Sarchet is a Presbyterian pastor in Chicago. A 10 year-old boy in her congregation named Cameron, walked into her office and said he needed to talk to her. Fresh from soccer practice, and wearing his Cincinnati Reds baseball cap, he had a request for her. "I'd like to be baptized," he said. "We were learning about Jesus' baptism in Sunday School. The teacher asked the class who was baptized, and all the other kids raised their hands. I want to be baptized too."

Using her best pastoral care tone of voice, she said, "Cameron, do you really want to be baptized because everyone else is?" His freckles winked up at her and he replied, "No. I want to be baptized because it means I belong to God."

She was touched by his understanding. "Well, then," she said, "How about this Sunday?" His smile turned to concern and he asked, "Do I have to be baptized in front of all those people in the church? Can't I just have a friend baptize me in the river?" She asked where he came up with that idea. "Well, Jesus was baptized by his cousin John in a river, wasn't he?"

Caught off guard, she conceded, "You have a point. But, if a friend baptized you in the river, how would the church recognize it?" Realizing this was a teachable moment, she climbed up on her foot stool to reach for her Presbyterian Book of Order that was located on the highest shelf. But before she placed her hand on the book, he responded.

*"I guess by my new way of living"* he said.

She nearly fell off the foot stool and left the Book of Order on the shelf. Cameron's understanding was neither childish nor simple. It was profound. Baptism calls us to a new way of living.

How do people in the Murray Calloway County area know we have been baptized? They know by the way we live! Do we put God first in our lives? Do our actions match our words? Have we truly changed into the new creation God's as promised?

Today we are called to remember and to rejoice!

### *Service of Reaffirmation of Faith*

Resources:

[www.esermons.com](http://www.esermons.com)

From a sermon by Sarah Jo Sarchet preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago

Please know this is not a word for word manuscript of the preaching event. This is background material and primary thoughts that may or may not be used during the sermon delivery