

Hi David,
Here's this week's message. I hope you're having a great week.
Peace,
Andris

Mark 1:4-11 - Revised Standard Version

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; ¹¹and a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased."

Word, Water and Spirit

Introduction

Today I am going to talk about word, water and spirit, three elements that are presented in today's scripture readings. But first, I want to preface by speaking about the Gospel reading from Mark. It is about the baptism of Jesus and it sets the stage for Jesus' ministry. It begins saying:

"⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." In those days, the people of Israel had not seen a prophet for hundreds of years. Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah — they had all lived long before. There was a drought, so to speak, of prophetic voices. So people were thirsting for a person from whom holy truth was pouring with passion.

"⁵And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." The Jewish people had a relationship with the wilderness. Moses led them in the wilderness to freedom, to become a nation. The wilderness was the place where they developed their relationship with God. We have spoken about the wilderness lately as a trying, barren place. It is. And it was. But for the people of Israel, it was also a fruitful place in a spiritual sense. Good things happened in the wilderness. *God* things happened in the wilderness. So people poured out of the city to hear John.

“Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey.” In 2 Kings 1:8 it says of Elijah that, **“He had a garment of hair and had a leather belt around his waist.”** Another translation says he was a hairy man. Either way, John the Baptist was seen as Elijah returned. His diet is simple. The people of Israel turned their backs on the gilded temple, the fine garments and spiced food of the biggest city in the region and reoriented themselves. They got back to basics. They sought out a prophet. They sought to experience God.

“And [John] preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.” This statement had a lot of significance. The people looked at John as a holy man, yet he says he is not worthy to untie the sandals of the one who is coming. The master/servant relationship was familiar to people then in a way it is foreign now. If John was a prophet, then one who was coming must truly be great.

“I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” What is this all about? This verse goes to the heart of the mystery of our faith. My hope is that we all move towards the experience of this baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Now I’ll turn to the three elements I mentioned in the beginning: Word, Water and Spirit, in what is perhaps more of a meditation than what you might call a sermon.

Word

Lets talk about words first. We treat words today as if they were plentiful and cheap. We get weary of words. But words are powerful. They can be life giving or destructive. They can harm or heal.

You could say a spoken word is a sound vibration. It is a thought made manifest. Genesis 1, which we read earlier says, **“And God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.”**(1:3) Creation unfolds as a speech event. God speaks the world into being. There is a beautiful interpretation of the Genesis story, where “speaking” is replaced with “singing.” Words contain music, even monotones have a tone. And I like the thought of God singing the creation into being.

Since words matter, and we make meaning from them, lets look at the meaning of some of the Greek words used in Mark 1:4. It says John was, **“preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”**

- In Greek, baptism is *“baptisma”* which means “dipping.”
- Repentance is *“metanoia”* which means “a change of mind.”
- Forgiveness is *“aphesis”* which means “pardon” or “release,” as from prison or debt.

- Sins is “*hamartia*” which means to miss the target.

So in the literal Greek translation, John was proclaiming **“immerse yourself in a full change of mind and be released from all the times you’ve missed the mark.”** That sounds like a very renewing message to me. It was a message that drew people from their comfortable homes in the city into the wilderness. It was a **word**, a message that drew them out. It was a full immersion experience in good news and rebirth. The **words** of John drew people to the riverside, down to the water, to be renewed.

Water

So lets turn now from words to water.

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ²The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.” Water was in the beginning and God’s spirit, was moving over it.

The Gospel of Mark begins not with Jesus’ birth, but with Jesus’ baptism, his immersion in water. Baptism signifies a dipping, or washing. Baptism was a new birth. You go into the Jordan with all the tired old dust of the world weary man or woman and emerge cleansed, renewed, reborn.

We all know that our bodies are roughly 70% water and the earth is covered by about the same percentage of water, mostly in the oceans. What you might not know however, is that water responds to words. “The Hidden Messages in Water” is a book published in 2004, written by Masaru Emoto who took water samples and experimented by saying different words to the water and then freezing it and taking pictures of the crystals that formed. Words like “love and gratitude,” “angel” or “thank you” would result in amazingly well formed intricate crystals with delicate flowerlike symmetry. Words like “you fool” or “you make me sick” resulted in misshapen, illformed or broken patterns. Water that was ignored was also illformed.

What does this suggest? To me, it means that the water, a necessary part of physical life, is also a substance that responds to our thoughts and words.

It has been said that water is life. Where water is, there is life. Water flows. It saturates. In our climate it can take on the various forms of matter: solid, liquid and gas. Inside of our bodies, water takes on a crystalline gel-like form, called the fourth phase of water. When you think of the power we have to change water’s structure with our thoughts, intentions and words, you realize that “metanoia” or “repentance” or “changing one’s mind” was a part of John’s baptism that was transforming someone on

the inside, as much as it was a demonstration of washing and rebirthing the outside of the body in the river.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes, **“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”**(12:2) A renewal of the mind changes ones life. The renewal of our minds from thoughts of limitation, lack, and competition to thoughts of abundance, gratitude, and serving others changes the structure of the physical substance of which we are formed. Think about that in light of all of the old beliefs we cling to, all the partisan, political, spiritual and interpersonal judgements we make. If we are not open to a change of mind, then we are closed off to the experience of a restructuring, fertile rebirth and renewal.

Spirit

So let us turn now to spirit and return once again to John’s statement, **“I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”** The immersion, the dipping in the water was a symbolic act to mark the change of mind that had to happen to prepare people for Jesus’ arrival. John came to prepare the way — the way for God to reach us, each one of us, personally, through the life of Jesus. Jesus then demonstrates this cleansing immersion in order to prepare himself in body and mind to be receptive for the Divine Spirit.

Well, we might ask, what is spirit? When in Genesis, when it says, **“the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters,”** the Hebrew word for Spirit is *Ruach*, which is also translated as “breath” or “wind.” The meaning of this word can be as difficult to grasp as wind itself. It is an image of something you can’t see, but you can certainly both feel, as in the wind, and experience, as in your own breath. It is, perhaps, the invisible essence of being. This divine, great and holy Spirit is something that Jesus receives and later is able to bestow on us, through a different baptism than the aforementioned dipping. This baptism descends, and it enters us.

Mark writes of the baptism of Jesus, **“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, “Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.”**

When Isaiah the prophet prayed for God to appear, he said, **“Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!”** (Isaiah 64:1) That sense of rending the heavens is what we have here when the heavens are opened. The Greek word is *schizomenous* the parent of our word “schism.” (We find this word again in Mark 15:38 when Jesus breathes his last and it says, **“The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.”**) Here, as

Jesus emerges from the Jordan, there is a rending of the fabric of creation and the spirit descends not “upon” Jesus as a mantle, but “into” Jesus. The Greek word is “*eiw*” which means “into.” Jesus comes out of the water and the spirit enters into him.

My question for all of us, is how do we prepare ourselves to receive the Holy Spirit as Jesus did? How do we become vessels, as water fills a sponge, for spirit to enter into us? Can we immerse ourselves in a change of mind so that God’s creative spirit of love can enter and transform us?

Celtic band The Waterboys have a song called “Spirit.” The lyric refers to “man,” but the intention is the “human being.”

Spirit

The Waterboys

Man gets tired
Spirit don't
Man surrenders
Spirit won't

Man crawls
Spirit flies
Spirit lives
When man dies

Man seems
Spirit is
Man dreams
The spirit lives

Man is tethered
Spirit free
What spirit
Is man can be

What spirit
Is man can be
What spirit
Is man can be

What spirit
Is the man can be