

The Baptism of Hope  
Mark 1:1-8, 2 Peter 3:8-15a  
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights  
Pastor Dave Carver  
June 5, 2016



<sup>1</sup>Do you remember that day, so many years ago? Do you remember the time that the angry young preacher came around? He was so . . . so different. He was so . . . so appealing and repulsive at the same time. While most of the preachers we had ever known dressed in fine clothes and stayed in the city, the one they called John wore rags and lived in the desert. The ones that we were used to were polite to a fault, and called us "Sir" and "Ma'am" and acted like they appreciated the offerings we put in the basket, but John yelled at us. Everybody knew that people who had been in the church all their lives needed to be ceremonially washed every now and then, and only the pagans needed to be baptized, but John claimed that everyone needed to repent, and everyone needed to be forgiven. Why, it was just unheard of.

I know that you know a lot about that day that John stood by the banks of the Jordan and hollered about baptism. But here is something that you may not have known.

In the crowd on this particular day was a widow woman, whose name was Susanna. She had come to hear the preacher because her life was hard, and she was hoping for something to make it easier. In fact, she forced her three sons to come with her, even though none of these teenagers would have gone along if the choice were theirs to make.

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<sup>1</sup> *St. John the Baptist*, El Greco (c. 1600)

Today, I'll tell you the story of what happened to Susanna and her sons as a result of meeting John they call "the baptizer".

As I have said, Susanna was curious. Nothing more, really. She was just wondering if maybe there could be some real hope and substance in a religion. She had tried to believe, but it seemed so unreal. But what she saw and heard that day touched her in a way that nothing else had, and so Susanna waded into the murky waters of the Jordan and asked John to bring her to the "one who was to come".

Her oldest son, Simon, was appalled to see his mother associating with such a religious lunatic, and he made no secret of his shame and scorn. Oh, she was his mother, and he continued to treat her with some measure of respect, but it was a respect of the hands and feet, not of the heart. Weeks and even months after they returned to the village, he was filled with disgust at the notion of his mother falling for such hucksterism. As soon as he could, he left the village and moved to the city of Antioch, where he became a cloth merchant. Because he was her son, and because she was his mother, she continued to receive packages from him, and twice he went to visit her -- twice, in the course of the 27 years until she died -- twice, he took her money and tolerated her religion . . . but he could never really accept her again.



Now, the middle boy, whose name was Jacob, that was a different story altogether. Although he was only 17 the day that he was dragged out into the wilderness, you could tell that it was a day he would never forget. Jacob had been running with a group of young men who were enraged by the presence of a Roman army in the Promised Land. While their parents and

grandparents seemed to be happy waiting for some miraculous deliverance, Jacob and his friends knew that nothing would happen unless the faithful took charge.

<sup>2</sup>So when he heard John preaching about someone to come, someone who would be great and who would deliver the power of the Holy Spirit, well, Jacob just about ran into that water. He glared at John and practically demanded baptism, and as he came out of the water, he raised both hands high in the air and gave a shout - I'm not sure even now if it was a shout of joy or a prayer, but it was a shout that matched the determination on his face.

It was only a week or two after the baptism that Jacob and his friends formed an alliance with a group known as the Zealots - a political party that urged radical steps to overthrow the Roman government. They looked and waited for an opportunity to shake off the yoke of oppression - and always Jacob was looking for this powerful deliverer. There was a teacher who came to town, a man they called Yshua, or Jesus, who was really quite captivating to Susanna and to Jacob's younger brother, Nathaniel. But Jacob thought that he was soft on the Romans and could not be the Promised One.

About two years after meeting John, Jacob and several of his friends were caught trying to cut the bridge out from under a Roman Garrison passing through the gorge. They were executed on the spot and their bodies left for the vultures and the jackals. It was three weeks before Susanna knew what had happened.



And the youngest son, whose name was Nathaniel, he was the most thoughtful one. When their mother ran into the water for baptism, he was

*Preaching*, Anton Raphael Mengs (1728-1799)

not ashamed, like Simon. Neither was he eager to follow, as had Jacob. Nathaniel just watched. And, unbeknownst to his mother, he went back the next day, and the next. Something about what the preacher was saying had him hooked - but he wasn't sure what.

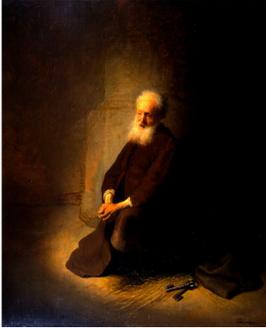
Finally, about three weeks after he had first seen John, Nathaniel asked to be baptized. And when he left, he went straight home and asked his mother to be released from his duties at home so that he might follow John and learn from him. Although Susanna was afraid, she knew that Nathaniel would do what Nathaniel would do, and so she gave him her blessing and off he went.

He had been gone for a few months when he returned home to report that John had been killed by Herod, but that he was now following a new rabbi, a teacher named Yshua - Jesus. He was the one, Nathaniel said. Jesus was the salvation of which John had spoken. He was sure of it.

After that, Susanna met with Nathaniel a few times, and even hosted Jesus and his friends once or twice. And, like her boy, she came to admire and even love the carpenter's son. But after a few years, Jesus was killed, and instead of returning home, Nathaniel became more convinced than ever of his faith. He claimed to have eaten and spoken with Jesus after he had died. He left the country altogether, and was never heard from again. There were rumors that he was killed by a tribal council in Greece, but nobody knows. He just disappeared.

And so years later, in the twilight of her life, Susanna runs into an old man she thinks she recognizes. His name is Simon, called Peter. And he was a friend of Nathaniel's. He was a friend of Jesus'. He was, in fact the leader of the group that was now called "The Way".

And this old lady pours her heart out to the preacher. "What do I do now?" she asked. "How can I believe? What is there left for me to hope for, really? This baptism, this faith, this Jesus -- it has alienated me from one son and killed my other sons. When will the promise come true? How many more sons will disappear?"



<sup>3</sup>And Peter, grizzled, hot-tempered, smelly, old Peter responded to this woman. One translator words his statement this way:

"God isn't late with his promise as some measure lateness. He is restraining himself on account of you, holding back the End because he doesn't want anyone lost. He's giving everyone space and time to change . . . since everything here today might well be gone tomorrow, do you see how essential it is to live a holy life? Daily expect the Day of God, eager for its arrival. The galaxies will burn up and the elements melt down on that day, but we'll hardly notice. We'll be looking the other way, ready for the promise . . . So my dear friends, since this is what you have to look forward to, do your very best to be found living at your best, in purity and peace. Interpret our Master's patient restraint for what it is: salvation.<sup>4</sup>

At the end of the day, the old preacher said, really, all we can do is hope. And we've got to act like we have hope. He didn't answer the old woman's question, exactly. He just tried to encourage her, he tried to help her to see that she doesn't see the whole picture, but that soon she will. "Hang on and keep trying" is what he essentially said.

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<sup>3</sup> *St. Peter in Prison*, Rembrandt Van Rijn (1631)

<sup>4</sup>Eugene Peterson, *The Message* 2 Peter 3:8 ff.

Now why in the world would I spin this yarn for you on this baptism Sunday, the first Sunday in June, in the year of our Lord 2016? Because there's a new preacher on the block who rants and raves? Because I suspect that there's someone here who's ready to join the rebellion?

No, that's not it. I'm telling you what might have happened because I think that the world in which we live is a lot like the one in which Susanna and her sons lived. It's a world that has lost hope. We live in a culture that can't imagine what real health and healing and wholeness might look like, and so we spin our wheels. We are unsure about the future - we look at the coming election and we shake our heads; we think about terror attacks and gun violence and refugee crises and healthcare costs and... well, many of us don't like to think of what will happen. It seems pretty out of control sometimes.

When we get lost in our fear about the future, we lose hope. And because we lose hope, we don't have any reason for big changes in our lives. "Rather than make big moves, we relax, settle into present arrangements, old habits, circular movements. We cling tightly to what is rather than dare to dream about what we ought to be."<sup>5</sup>



<sup>6</sup>Now listen to me, beloved. I am not John the Baptist. I am not the voice crying in the desert, eating locusts, wearing camel's hair.

I am Dave Carver. I am a pastor. I tell stories. I walk with God's people in Crafton Heights, and in Malawi, and in a few places in between. I am more apt to be eating wings and wearing khakis.

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<sup>5</sup> Will Willimon, *Proclamation 5, Series B* 1993, p. 21

<sup>6</sup> John the Baptist, detail from *The Isenheim Altarpiece*, Matthias Grünewald (1512-1516).

But today, today, let me play the part of John the Baptist. Let's make this a grand production, and let me be the person who will yell about the One who is far greater than I! Let me tell you about the One whose sandals I am unworthy to untie. Let me be the one to spread the waters of baptism on unsuspecting little girls this day...

And in a sense, let me even pretend that I am more than John the Baptist, because John could only look forward, dimly, to a time when a man would come and assume his ministry and lead the people forward. But where John had the sands of the Jordan river for his platform, I have the rough-hewn rock door of an empty tomb as mine; where John promised that God was coming, I can tell you that God has come -- that Immanuel - that God is with us. John had words to say, and I have words to say, but Jesus of Nazareth is *the* Word of life, the message of love and hope from God the Father.

You see, that's worth hoping about. That's worth getting excited about. Because just as my made-up friend Susanna was not forgotten by God in the length of her days, neither have you nor I been forgotten by God in the stories that we have lived. We are not beyond him. We are not too far away. We have reason for hope.



In 1987, I had the privilege to go to Germany. While there, I spent hours driving through East Germany to the city of West Berlin. Some of you may know that in those days, there were two Germanies: the free and democratic West and the poor and communist East. Two governments, two nations - separated by an ugly cement structure called the Berlin Wall. And I drove and walked along the Berlin wall. I saw "Checkpoint Charlie", where visitors could gain access from one side to

the other -- if the guards felt like it. I saw markers indicating the spot where children had been shot trying to make it from one side of the wall to the other. I saw mile after mile of razor wire, I saw tanks and guns and ugliness. And I saw what hatred looked like.

And not 500 yards from the wall, in West Berlin, I saw several brand new office buildings going up. And I asked my German friend, "Why in the world would you want to build those things so close to this wall? Is it to show the people in the East that you are succeeding and that your way of life is better than theirs?"

She was quick to reply. "No, that's not it at all. We are building these here now because when the wall comes down and we are once again a single country, then the office buildings will be in the middle of town."



I saw years of hatred and razor wire and people being shot. She saw a nation healed. I laughed at her idealism. She had a party about two years later when the Berlin wall was removed. And now, how many Germanies are there? And what's the capital of Germany?

Where are the walls in your life? Where is hope held hostage? People of God, beloved, will you let me play John the Baptist today? Will you let me rant and rave a little bit, as long as you feel the water of hope splashing on you?

Our God has not forgotten . Our God is gracious, and waiting even for me and for you. So hope. And act like you have hope. In the name of Jesus, Amen.