

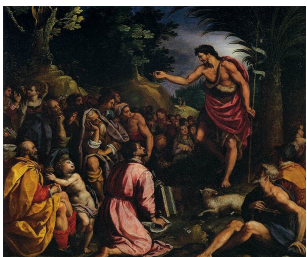
The First Ordination
December 10, 2017
Mark 1:9-13, Isaiah 42:5-7
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
Pastor Dave Carver

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https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2017/12/sermon12-10_2017-12-10_11-20-06_t001_in1.mp3

Perhaps you've seen *Saving Private Ryan*, the number one film from 1998 starring Tom Hanks as Captain Miller and Matt Damon as Private Ryan. Despite the movie's title, Damon's character doesn't speak until page 131 of a 162 page script. Conversely, the 2012 hit *The Hunger Games* shows us Katniss Everdeen within the first 58 seconds of the film. Apparently, there is no "recipe" for character development in a Hollywood story.

Similarly, the authors of Mark, Luke, Matthew, and John all take different approaches in introducing the main character of the Gospel accounts. Matthew and Luke give us a build-up in which we meet the parents, smell the shepherds, and greet the Wise Men. Heck, Luke even throws in a couple of blockbuster musical numbers in *The Benedictus* and *The Magnificat*.



¹Mark, on the other hand, brings us straight to the main event. There is a brief prologue, which we considered last week, wherein John the Baptist tells us something about the Messiah who is coming, and then – *boom* – we see the adult Jesus walk onto the scene. As we continue our study of Mark in the months to come, you'll come to see that our narrator is always in a hurry, always moving from one point of action to another.

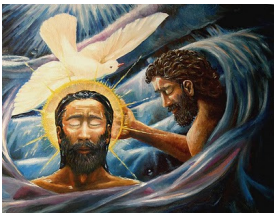
John is in the Judean wilderness, preaching up a storm. In fact, he starts a revival. People are crowding into the desert to catch a glimpse of this prophet – some, no doubt, because they want to see what the fuss is all about; others, perhaps, because

¹ *The Preaching of St. John the Baptist*, Alessandro Allori (1535-1607)

they are genuinely hungry for God and they need to change their lives; and still others, presumably, because they are eager to protect the faith and make sure that this newcomer doesn't mess things up.

About fifty miles to the north, in the town of Nazareth, a carpenter named Jesus sets down his tools and joins the pilgrimage into the wilds where he, too, will encounter John.

Although they are cousins, there is no glimmer of recognition from John as he baptizes the young workman. So far as John or anyone else who was there that day knows, Jesus is just another one of the dozens, or scores, or hundreds of people who heard the sermon and took the plunge.



²And yet when the baptism is over, according to Mark, *Jesus* saw the heavens open up and the Holy Spirit descending. Moreover, *Jesus* heard the voice of the Lord pronouncing the Divine blessing and presence. In Mark, that vision and voice is reserved for an audience of one – Jesus himself. No one else, apparently, saw or heard anything.

Now, here's a little bit of a spoiler alert for those of you who are with me for the long haul in our reading of the Gospel of Mark: the author is big on secrets – particularly, on keeping Jesus' identity a secret. Time and time again, we'll read of someone getting an inkling of who Jesus *really* is and what he's here to do, only to have the Lord shush that person and swear her or him to secrecy. For now, this part of the story is Jesus', and Jesus' alone to know.

It begs the question: what did Jesus know and when did he know it? To what extent was Jesus subject to the limitations of his human form, and in what ways were those limitations

² *Baptism of Christ*, Dave Zalenka (2005)

transcended by his divine nature? When did Jesus *know* that *HE* was the Messiah, the savior of the world? On the night of his birth, laying in the manger – did his infant brain possess some kind of supernatural knowledge? When he was growing up, hearing the songs his mother sang, he knew that he was different, of course... but *what* did he know and *when* did he know it?

In Mark, the declaration comes right here. “You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well-pleased...” So far as we know from the Gospel of Mark, *this* is when Jesus discovers, or at least embraces, his identity.

And it happens during a baptism.

Which would suggest that baptism is, at least in part, about forming one’s identity. Jesus, presumably, grew up memorizing passages such as the one you heard earlier from Isaiah. He knows that he is set aside for God’s purposes... and yet it is here, in his own baptism, where Jesus is told who he is and prepared for what is to come.

And, in true Markan style, he doesn’t have to wait long for what happens next.

Do you remember those advertisements that often air at the end of football season? The ones where the cameraman catches up with the hero of the winning team and says, “Hines Ward! You and the Pittsburgh Steelers just won the Super Bowl! What are you going to do next?” And the answer, of course, is “I’m going to Disneyland!”

In that narrative, one discovers who one is – a champion – and one is ushered into a magical place of beauty and wonder.

There are a lot of people in the Christian tradition who subscribe to that view theologically. “Hey, Sinner! You’ve just been baptized! You’ve been made right with God! What are you going to do next?”

“I’m going to a life full of unicorns and rainbows, where there’s always enough money, never any problems, and healing for whatever ails me.”



³Interestingly, however, that is not what takes place in Mark. In our reading for today, the result of baptism is that Jesus is immediately driven into the wilderness where he experiences difficulty and testing.

The “wilderness”, in biblical tradition, is a place that is home to forces that are hostile to God. In Mark, especially, we can see that it is, in some ways, the opposite of the Garden of Eden. Instead of a safe retreat filled with friendly animals and the presence of God, the locale to which Jesus is ushered is inhabited by wild beasts and in which he encounters the testing of Satan. The purpose of this testing, apparently, is to discern an answer to the question, “Is Jesus really who God has just said that Jesus is?” Again, the author of Mark handles this question with brevity, and there are not many details, but that seems to be the point of our reading from this morning. In his baptism, Jesus is told who he is, and in his temptation, that identity is immediately questioned.

So what?

I mean, really: all of this happened nearly two thousand years ago. What difference could it possibly make to Christians in 2017?

Well, the early church thought so much of this event that they made baptism normative for anyone who would call himself or herself a follower of Jesus. Within the first generation of its existence, the apostles had decided that pretty much anybody could get into the church. It didn’t matter if you were male or female, slave or free, Roman or Palestinian or Greek or Ethiopian;

³ *The Temptations in the Desert*, Michael O’Brien

you could be a prostitute, a soldier, a politician, a fisherman, or a magician...*as long as you got baptized*. Baptism was a huge deal for the early church, and that emphasis continues up to this day. In fact, in our little corner of the church, we say that there are only two sacraments – two divine rites in which we share: communion and baptism.

What's that about?

For starters, we embrace the idea that in our case, just as it was in Jesus', baptism is about confirming your identity. Just as Jesus was told who he was when he rose up from the waters, so our own baptism informs our understanding of who and whose we are.

Those of you who have been around a while know that it's my practice, as often as I can, to hightail it out to the hospital when a baby is born so that I can read Psalm 139 to our new sister or brother. And, when Lorelai was a day old, that's what I did – I wrestled her out of her grandmother's arms and started reading her the lyrics to a song that is 3000 years old.

Why do I do that? For the same reason that we baptize babies: because we need to be working each and every day to teach children who they are. The world would very much like to lay its own claims upon the children of humanity: we are taught that we are consumers, or warriors; we are told that we are defined by what we do or what we own; we are being sold the idea that the most important thing about us is our gender or our race or our nationality. And while the Church of Jesus Christ would surely say that some of those things matter a great deal, first and foremost, we are children of God who are fearfully and wonderfully made. We are baptized. That is the source of our prime identity.

In addition to being formative to this concept of the self, baptism is a preparation for that which is to come. Just as the

vision and the voice from above at his own baptism prepared Jesus to engage in ministry with and for the world around him, so we are called to and prepared by our own baptisms to bear witness to the presence and authority of God in our world.

Jesus was sent – no, he was *driven* – into the wilderness. The language in the Gospel of Mark is strong and emphatic. There, in the place of desolation, he is tested by Satan and ministered to by angels.

And since that is the case, God's people ought not to be surprised when we find ourselves in the midst of testing and trial. After all, like Jesus, we have been baptized.

And so, like Jesus, we are called to point to and work toward the Divine purposes in a world that is, more often than not, hostile to those purposes.

You and I, this week, are called to point to reconciliation even when there is a lot of money to be made by creating alienation and selling security. In the last month, there have been 19 people killed and 88 wounded in mass shootings in the United States.⁴ And do you know what happens every time there's a mass shooting? More guns, more ammunition is sold. We have been told that security and safety are to be bought from companies like Remington or Smith & Wesson. And that is a lie.

You and I, this week, are being called to point to trust, even where there are entire industries built on cultivating fear. We are called to point to love that is genuine and self-giving, even when our world tells us that love – and people - are commodities to be bought and sold.

You and I, this week, are called to continue to point to hope even when it seems so dim that we can scarcely see it ourselves. A couple of years ago, when the most recent horrifying violence

⁴ <http://www.gunviolencearchive.org/mass-shooting>

was breaking out across South Sudan, I attended a conference of church and government leaders who were considering what we could do. The most poignant moment of that meeting was when my friend Michael looked out at the room after having been asked, “Well, what do we do?”, and he said, “I have to hope. I don’t have any good reason to have hope; and I don’t see much incentive to hope, but I have to hope, because hope may be all there is right now.”

In other words, we who are baptized are called to live and move and breathe in places where, oftentimes, the purposes of God are neither apparent nor valued.

After worship, we’ll have a really quick congregational meeting at which we’ll elect a few officers. In our tradition, elders and deacons are ordained – they are called to the side where they are prayed over and prepared for some special work. I was ordained as a Deacon when I was 16 years old, and I was ordained as a Pastor when I was 33. Neither of those occasions, however, marks the first time I was ordained.



⁵My first ordination came on December 25, 1960 in the Presbyterian Church of Dansville. In that drafty old building in Western New York a man with rough hands and coffee on his breath held me over the water and did to me what we’ll be doing to Lorelai in a few moments...and what, in all probability was done to most of you a lifetime ago. I am wearing the handprints of some of you that can prove it...

Baptism is a setting apart, an acknowledgement of God’s reign and rule in your life and in our world; it is also a preparation for the testing that will surely come. Earlier this week, I was given a book of poetry by some of the inmates at the Allegheny County Jail, and inscribed on the cover was a remark attributed to CS Lewis: “Hardships often prepare ordinary people for an

⁵ Stained Glass Window from Immaculate Conception Catholic Church, Port Clinton, OH

extraordinary destiny.”

You who are baptized should not be surprised when you find yourselves in places that are challenging or even apparently hopeless. That’s where the baptized are sent.

There’s a little line near the beginning of the baptismal liturgy to which I hope you’ll be attentive this morning. I’ll say, “Let us remember our own baptisms as we celebrate this sacrament.” Some of you can clearly recall the event as it happened. You were old enough to appreciate and remember it. Whether that is the case for you or not, each of us is called *every single day* to remember *that it happened*.

This morning, may you remember your baptism – your first ordination. And may you press on in the midst of whatever wilderness you find yourself; may you find angels there to minister to you in your weakness; and by the grace of God, may you seek to become an angel as you encounter someone else in pain. Thanks be to God. Amen.