

# **“An Early Sign of Who Jesus Will Be and the Nature of our Calling”**

**Mark 1:4–11**

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All baptisms are deeply significant, but some of them seem to be a little more transformative for numerous reasons. The nature of a person’s life before baptism has something to do with it. Some of us experience more radical change than others. Whether the faith decision reflected in baptism is expected or not also has an influence on how dramatic the experience is. But for whatever reason(s), the last two baptisms I performed in the church I served in Richmond were transformative, and not just for the people being baptized.

First, I baptized an African-American woman in her seventies. Everything about her experience was life changing. She came into the church because of her fifteen-year-old grandson’s involvement in Vacation Bible School. She had attended church most of her life but had never made a profession of faith. Her grandson’s experience compelled her to act on what she believed. Quite often children do lead the way, drawing parents back to church, this time a grandparent.

But it wasn’t just this woman’s experience that was transformed. Others were transformed as well. When I asked this dear woman who in our church had been most influential on her journey, most welcoming of her, she named a woman in our church there who used some of the most racist language of anyone I knew. Yet she welcomed this individual woman of color in a Christlike way. It was a reminder that we are all works-in-progress. Transformation is ongoing.

Second, I baptized a man in his eighties who had studied extensively with a Russian philosopher. Joe attended Sunday School regularly and was embraced by the men in his class, but he was always clear to say that he did not believe what the church proclaimed about God and Jesus. In fact, he would often give a summary of a lecture on what he called the “multiple I’s”, saying, “I cannot say I believe anything, because there are multiple I’s, different aspects of who I am.”

Needless to say, I was astonished when in response to my announcement that I was leaving to serve a church in Winston-Salem, Joe approached me and said he wanted me to baptize him. He said he had been thinking about this for some time, was considering what he believed, and if anyone was going to baptize him, he wanted it to be me.

I was humbled by his request and deeply moved by the experience, though when we went over the details the morning of baptism, he said, “When you ask me about my faith, I’m going to give my lecture on the multiple I’s.” I said, “Joe, you need to remember that I am younger, bigger, and stronger than you, and we will be in water...” He did not give his lecture, but he did give his testimony through baptism. It was testimony to Christ and the men who had stuck with him all those years. Some baptisms just stand out because they are so transformative.

Jesus’ baptism is one of these. We are so familiar with this story and its presumed meaning that it is easy to miss the nature of what is happening. It’s not that Jesus’ life is in desperate need of transformation; scripture teaches that he is without sin. But his willingness to be baptized transforms our understanding of what a Messiah is, or at least it provides an early sign of who he will be, and in the process, it gives us a glimpse of our calling as his followers.

What John is doing in the wilderness is radical. A water baptism is not unprecedented. According to my New Testament Professor, Alan Culpepper, the Essenes at Qumran practice repeated self-administered ritual washing (Smyth and Helwys Commentary, *Mark*, p. 46). But John couples baptism with repentance, a change of heart, and calls all people to it. What he is doing is dramatic in and of itself, for what it demands of people, but for Jesus to participate in this baptism is shocking!

The Gospel writers realize this. Matthew has John protest that he should be baptized by Jesus. Luke reports that John has been thrown in prison before he says that Jesus was baptized by John. And John records testimony about the Spirit descending on Jesus without explicitly referring to Jesus’ baptism. Mark just tells the story in straight-forward manner. This is the Gospel in which everything happens “immediately”, but Mark does note that John realizes he is not the focus of this story.

All the Gospel writers tell this story with some hesitation, we might even say embarrassment. Surely Jesus is not coming to be forgiven of his sins, given the church's teaching about him, but it could look like he is. Furthermore, to be baptized by John may make it appear that John is the primary leader — and he has many followers in this time — though he does say quite clearly that he is not.

John says the one coming after him is more powerful than him, so much so that he is not worthy to untie his sandals. In this time, such a menial task would be beneath even a servant, but John says he is not worthy of it in this case, so much greater is the one coming after him, that is, Jesus. But for anyone looking on in real time and wondering if Jesus might be the Messiah, submitting to John's baptism is startling!

And yet, knowing what we know about him, it makes sense. Jesus is not one to cut corners or choose an easy path, nor is he one to stand aloof and claim a place of privilege. He chooses the way of service and sacrifice, the way of the cross. He identifies with the ordinary and the outcast. If others need to be baptized, he will submit to baptism — not simply immersion in water, but immersion in a life of suffering love.

The Apostle Paul tells the church in Philippi that Christ did not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness... he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross (Philippians 2:6–8). From the very beginning, Jesus identifies with everyday people and gives himself for others. We have seen this in the nature of his birth, and now we see it in his baptism. What kind of Messiah will he be? The writing is on the wall...

How does God respond to what Jesus does? Mark says the heavens are “torn apart,” not just opened, torn apart! Radical change is coming. The Spirit descends, empowering Jesus for his journey. He will baptize with the Holy Spirit, John says, but Jesus must be empowered to do this, filled with the Spirit. Finally, a voice from heaven says, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” God affirms Jesus for who he is. God confirms that he is not only the Messiah but this kind of Messiah, one who lives in solidarity with others, especially the poor and weak, the ordinary and common.

All of this tells us a great deal about Jesus. It's a bit like what we learn in the early scenes of "Master and Commander" about Captain Jack Aubrey or what we learn early on in "Hidden Figures" about the three heroic women. We know this captain will have wisdom and courage. We know these women will contribute something magnificent to the mission of NASA. Early on in a story in literature and film we are often given glimpses of who a character will be. Right here at the beginning of Mark, the Gospel writer tells us a great deal about Jesus' character and identity, how he will proceed, who he will befriend.

But this also tells us a great deal about the nature of our calling as followers of Jesus. If we are following him, we will choose a path of suffering love, not a place of arrogance and assumption. We will live in solidarity with others who struggle in various ways, not isolate ourselves and practice judgment. As Jesus refuses to opt out of challenges others face, we are called to identify with all that people around us confront.

One scholar writes about a participant in a Clinical Pastoral Education group who was not preparing for ministry (Alicia Vargas, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). Given the rigorous nature of CPE, the deep personal reflection involved, one might assume the person was a masochist, but she was the director of a seminary program who decided to require students to take CPE. She enrolled because she did not want to require others to do something she was not willing to do.

If only all leaders had this conviction... Jesus doesn't opt out of baptism or any other point of identification with others, nor should we.

But it's not just a matter of identifying with others. Jesus lives and dies for others. This is the baptism he later references when James and John, the sons of Zebedee, say they want to sit on his left and right in glory (Mark 10:38). They think they want to be like Jesus but don't realize what this means. We're talking about a radical reorientation of life wherein we aren't just kind to others and share some of what we have but are willing to sacrifice for others, give all if necessary. To state the obvious, this is a countercultural message. This is a different path that requires the kind of repentance John talks about, turning away from something less than we are and toward something noble, but this is the calling of the Gospel, and it not only benefits others; it makes us whole.

In an article in the Winter 2024 issue of *Plough* Rowan Williams describes this kind of repentance with his customary eloquence. He says the basic form of sin from which we need to be delivered is the myth of self-sufficiency. “The diabolical urge that destroys our well-being again and again,” he says, “is the temptation to think of ourselves as somehow able to set our own agenda in isolation, and the greatest and most toxic paradox that results is that we become isolated from our own selves...

“Christ comes to introduce us to the self we have not met,” he continues, “the unique responsive spark that springs up out of the recognition that we emerge as gifts from the hand of God, that we are made alive only as a part of the symphonic flow of all things working together (p. 61).” To put it succinctly, we are made to live with and for others. This is the way Jesus models, beginning with baptism.

How we come to embrace this sacred truth varies. It is not always a literal baptism in water that transforms us. The important thing is that something does, and we are able to embrace our true character.

An attorney in another setting told me the story of how he came to do this. He had been extremely successful, building a massive practice and living for the next case and greatest reward. His entire being was wrapped up in his work, his accomplishments, his accumulation of wealth and prestige. Relationships took a back seat, family took a back seat, he went to church because it’s what you did, but it had little value for him. He was riding high... and then he lost everything.

He didn’t go into the details, they didn’t matter, he said. What mattered was that he realized he was living an empty life in spite of all appearances. He experienced a conversion, a true conversion at the core of his being, and with God’s help, he rebuilt and reoriented his life. He didn’t move away and become a missionary. He remained an attorney, but with a different approach, seeking to serve others, and he did his best to balance work, home, and church, with faith at the center of it all.

We might say he had his own baptismal experience, just not in water, but how we are immersed in this centered way of life spent in service to others doesn’t matter as long as we are. In Jesus’ baptism, we see who he will be and who we are called to be – for others, to the glory of God, and for our own well-being. Thanks be to God!