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“Marking’ Time: Baptism”
Mark 1:4-11; Acts 19:1-7

You may have found the first part of this week’s sermon title puzzling... ‘marking time.’ ‘Marking time’ til WHAT? In light of the discussions that we are now in the midst of in considering the future of this church, one might cynically assume this could refer to ‘marking time’ until the END. Let me assure you that this is NOT the direction this message is going! To the contrary, I firmly believe that God has a LOT more in store for this body of believers. And that our focus should NOT be on ‘endings,’ but rather, on beginnings!

As I began to deliberate on what to preach on in January, and February, I thought about how early Easter comes this year. That we have hardly finished thinking about Jesus’ *birth*, and here we are considering His *death* (and resurrection). And as my mind still had memories of the ‘preparation’ aspect of Advent, I thought about how we can also ‘prepare’ for the Lent and Easter Season. Noting that the Gospel readings from the lectionary focused on Mark, it occurred to me that we could engage in a series preparing us for Lent that, in good double-entendre form, could be aptly named “Marking Time.” And in this first installment of ‘marking time’ until Lent, we will consider the focal topic of this passage: **baptism**.

The beginning of a story is always very important. For, in any effective ‘story-telling’ format, the opening words will set the stage for the actions that are to follow. As we know from the Christmas season we have just experienced, the gospels of Matthew and Luke begin with birth narratives... and in the case of Luke, not only of Jesus, but of the very same John the Baptist we are considering today. Here in Mark, however, the focus at the very beginning of the story is not *birth*, but *re-birth*. Not birth of a physical nature, but of a spiritual one. And so, as we begin a 6-week study of Mark’s gospel, that consideration will be done by first establishing the foundational importance of our **BAPTISM**.

That ‘importance’, for one, is borne witness to by the fact that we have had not one, but TWO Bible passages to consider this morning. Also, you ‘may’ have noticed that the Baptismal font is ‘font and center’ (☺) here in the middle of our worship space. It is SO important that whole denominations of followers of Christ, millions strong, take their very name from this

word '**baptism.**' But for us Presbyterians? Most often we only think about it when a cute little baby is baptized. In the words of our baptismal liturgy, we '*remember our baptism*' only when that infant joins the church as a youth. Too often, this baptismal font is little more than a nice piece of decorative furnishing in our place of worship.

Today's Scriptures remind us that our baptism is SO much more important than that. In our reformed tradition, it is one of the only two sacraments we observe. It is one of the only two holy occasions that were participated in and ordained by Jesus Christ himself. Baptism is one of the two sacred observances we have that represents the very **core**, the very **essence** of what it means to be a CHRISTIAN.

As I read these two different passages, by two different authors, at two different times, there seems to be, appropriately enough, **two** aspects that they share in common. One, that they both speak of what John did in this defining moment as a follower of Christ as a "**baptism of repentance.**" And secondly, that following that baptism in water there was a tangible experience of the "**Holy Spirit.**" Therefore, it seems to me that this important event in the life of believers can be considered to occur in TWO PARTS. There is the **going into** the water, submerged, deprived of oxygen... and the **coming out** of the water, into the **fresh air**. The **washing-away** action of **water**... the **filling** action of **the Spirit**. The former part that represents the **forgiveness** of sins, through **penitence**.... The latter that gives **fortitude** against sin, by God's **power**. There is the **human** aspect of **dying** to **self**... and the **Divine** empowerment of **life** in **Christ**. Putting it simply, **Baptism** is a matter of **death** and **life**!

Whenever you and I come into worship, and look toward the front of the F.H./Sanctuary, our eyes take in the symbols of our faith: the cross, the Table, the baptismal font. The cross, where Jesus took our place, **dying** for our sin... that same cross that, being empty, reminds us that by His sacrifice we may have **life**. The Communion Table, where we partake of bread and cup, which represents the body and blood He gave up in **death**... given that we might **live**. In the same way, these waters of baptism also represent **death** and **life**. Just as Jesus took our sin and left them in the burial tomb, so too does God wash away our transgressions in the 'watery tomb' of baptism. And just as the Son of God rose out of the water to have the Holy Spirit descend upon Him, to be both His **power** and **companion**, so too

must you and I seek the Spirit of God to be our **strength** and **comfort**.

To illustrate these two vital aspects of our baptism... **forgiveness** and **fortitude** (or, if you prefer, **penitence** and **power**), I would give you two simple analogies. At our home in B.R. we are 'blessed' to have a swimming pool. (well, I guess its sort of a mixed blessing; since a pool can also be defined as a 'hole in the ground into which one pours money!'). Anyway, one of the favorite pastimes of our little grand girls is take some pool toys... particularly, some colored plastic rings and paisley-looking vinyl 'batons'... and toss them into the deep end. Yes, for "Pops" to go and fetch. They get some bizarre pleasure from watching their 'buoyant' grandfather try to keep himself submerged while attempting to retrieve these objects.

Well, besides the fact that I don't 'sink' like I used to, I also can't hold my breath as I could when I was their Daddy's age. So as I scurry around the bottom of the pool, ferociously trying to pick up what seems to be an *increasing* number of objects with rapidly *decreasing* oxygen, during which that eight-foot depth can sure seem like a WHOLE lot more than that. By the time I break through the surface, fearful thoughts of being trapped in a watery-grave are 'ex-pelled' out of my mind as quickly as that life-giving air is 'im-pelled' into my body.

Friends, as much as you and I try to hold our 'spiritual breath'... as much as we try to make it on our own, to be strong, to not give into our human weaknesses... we will eventually 'run out of air.' We might think that we can make it without God, but our limitations will catch up with us. Without the grace and **forgiveness** of our Heavenly Father, we will be trapped in these 'bodies of death.' He is the only one that can pull us out of the grave and breathe new life into us. First, however, we must come to Him in **penitence**... to 'exhale' our ways of sin; to have them washed away.

The other side of that baptismal 'coin' is the one of **fortitude**... of **power**. Confident that in Christ, we are forgiven, what do we DO with that assurance? How can we live to enjoy the fullest extent of the love of God in Jesus Christ?

Continuing in our 'water' analogies, I really enjoy taking long, hot showers. Which can be a REAL problem when you and your spouse have to share an apartment-sized water heater! (Right, Barrie?) Anyway, I do like to take my time when showering. There's something really comforting, and refreshing, about that steady stream of hot, cleansing water. When I get out, I

am ready to get dressed and get after the day. I am revitalized, empowered, eager to face what lies ahead. Without that 'outpouring,' I'm dragging, unmotivated... with it, I can take on the world. All from a little water.

Friends, if you and I are to accomplish what God wants us to... if we are to reach our potential as believers in Jesus Christ... we cannot do it on our own. Forgiveness is not enough... we need fortitude. Not just penitence... but power. We need the comfort and refreshment of the Gods' Spirit. We need to be revitalized, empowered, eager to face what lies ahead. My invigorating shower can wear off by the time I reach the front door of the church... or the CAR, for that matter! To show to others the full extent of God's amazing love for us, as displayed in the baptism of repentance, we need the full extent of His strength as displayed in the baptism of the Lord Jesus. We need the power of the Holy Spirit.

There is power in the Spirit. There is power in signs and symbols: the cross, the Table, the baptismal font. There is power in words... particularly those words that we use to declare our faith in Almighty God. Calling on that Spirit... humbled by that cross... thankful for that Table... standing before that font... let us now confess our faith together. We will do so by re-affirming the Baptismal Covenant which was confessed on our behalf as infants, and/or declared as young people. Whenever that was in the past, to borrow from last week's message, today's 'a new day'. May the Spirit speak to us afresh how we are to live as sons and daughters of the living God. Would you please stand as you are able, and thoughtfully respond to these questions...

- 1) *Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure and without hope except in God's sovereign mercy.*
- 2) *Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Savior of sinners, and do you receive and depend upon Christ alone for your salvation as it is offered in the Gospel?*
- 3) *Do you intend in humble reliance on the grace of the Holy Spirit to live as a follower of Jesus Christ?*
- 4) *Do you intend to be a faithful member of this congregation by supporting and participating in its worship and ministry as God gives you strength?*

As sinners saved by the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, we claim the strength to live as followers of the One Triune God. And all God's people said, "AMEN!"