

**"Coming through the Waters"**  
**(Mark 1: 4-11)**  
**January 10, 2021**

"God's voice is over the waters ... God's voice is power ... shatters the cedars ... shakes the wilderness ... causes the oaks to whirl ... stripping the forest bare." The words of the psalm today reveal that God's voice is aggressive and fierce. When we compare these words with that in creation, "Let there be light," and there was light, the contrast is obvious. The expression of God's power and mystery depends on the person who says it. It could be written as, "The light pierced the darkness," just as killing an animal is nothing unusual for a hunter, blasting a mountain to a miner, and melting a piece of iron to an ironsmith. However, the writer of this creation story expressed it poetically, "Let there be light," and there was light. Do you also realize, before the word was said, the Spirit of God was there already, hovering over the waters, ready to take action? However, both the waters and the Spirit of God were not to be seen. There was no light. No one knew what was inside the waters, and no one knew what the Spirit of God looks like. Both of them were mysteries; only God could reveal them to us. Then the next action of God was that God disturbed the waters. "Let there be a vault between the waters to separate the water from water." Like what Moses did to the Red Sea for the sake of the slaves in Egypt.

In today's scripture reading, when Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens torn apart, and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. What did it mean to him? What does it mean to us?

Jesus was one of those who went to John the baptizer for baptism. John was proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Why was

Jesus there then? It's a fact that baptism was common in the world Jesus lived. It's one type of purification symbolism, to purify one from sin, from destruction, from the profane area before entering a holy site, from something under a taboo. If there's no record stating that even John himself had hesitation in baptizing Jesus (Matt 3:13-14), we might not realize there was a problem. John knew that he was not the One who would occupy the center of the stage. He was a pointer, pointed not to himself, but to the One who is to come, whom all need. And then, Jesus showed up.

We were not told if John and Jesus were close to each other, probably not, even though their mothers were relatives and met before. John came from a priestly family, lived probably in Jerusalem. Why would John appear in the wilderness then, dressed and ate not like his contemporaries? How long did he live in the desert? Did he associate himself with the Qumran community that is well-known to us through the Dead Sea Scroll? They shared the same attitude towards the institutionalized Jewish religion, the temple cult. Now he appeared and proclaimed a baptism of repentance. Through Jordan River's water, he helped people of all classes experienced and understood that they could escape from God's wrath. A lot of people came to him for it, including Pharisees and Sadducees. However, he warned them they could not rely on the ritual to save them. Coming through the water would not give them an entitlement from God, as what they thought about their sacrificial system in the temple. "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matt 3:8) is something the water itself could not give. He set the stage for something more splendid, for someone who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire. (Matt 3:11)

As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you, I am well pleased." Nobody else but Jesus saw and heard that. Was it the motive of Jesus to have the baptism because he needed to repent? Did he sin? Judging from what he did in his ministry, he was a sinful person. He had physical contact with a woman who had blood-disease, talked to women and prostitutes in public, ate with sinners, mingled with the untouchables, and allowed his disciples to do forbidden things on Sabbath. The idea of doing these must be in his mind for a long time, long before he had the baptism. He didn't just start doing these things all out of a sudden. Baptism was a special moment for Jesus, to make a change, to repent, repent for not doing what was right, what was in his mind!

The word "sin" in Greek is ἁμαρτία, which means "miss the mark, or underachieve." Do you think anyone can live outside this definition of sin, including Jesus? I am not worrying about the question of whether Jesus was a sinful person like us. Imperfection is an integral part of human nature, of the whole creation. If Jesus were one of us, we would share the same nature. Baptism worked for Jesus because it's for him a moment for making decision; to leave Nazareth, to leave home, to leave his comfort zone. It was also for him a moment of identification; to enroll himself with a movement towards God, not for his own sake, but for the sake of others. "You are my Son, the Beloved." It's for Jesus also a moment of approval. It's an affirmation from God that he was doing the right thing. Don't take the word "beloved" lightly, though. As the same Holy Spirit threw Jesus out into the wilderness for temptation right after his coming through the waters.

Baptism provided Jesus a moment to make up his mind, identify to whom he belonged, set his life goal, and ascertain what he thought.

For some of us, baptism happened a long time ago, while it might just occur recently for some. Time doesn't really matter. Baptism is meaningful to us not because of the ritual but because of the Holy Spirit who is always with us. God's presence will shake and shape the foundations of our faith. Our lives do not remain the same but are in the process of transformation.

Storytime. Once a master said to a businessman, "A fish perishes on dry land, so you will perish if you keep entangled in the world. A fish must return to water, and you must return to solitude." The businessman was shocked and surprised in an unpleasant way. He said, "Must I give up my business and go into a monastery?" The master said, "No. No. No. Hold on to your business, but don't forget to go into your heart."

There are so many things we have to deal with; sometimes we forget what we really want. A meaningful life does not merely mean to follow the flow, to do what others are doing. Baptism reminds us that we can do a reset and make a change in our lives. God is watching, watching for that moment when we come through the waters. God wants to break into our existence and say to us we are God's beloved. Do we want to resist all new experiences, or to incorporate our new experience and weave it into the old ways, or simply let go of the old beliefs entirely? It is now the time to start the exploration again. Identify our old habits. Get a fresh start and respond to the needs of this planet and the people who live on it. Amen.