

## *Plunging into Christmas*

Second Sunday of Advent

December 8, 2002

Background Study

*Scripture Passage – Mark 1:1-8 (NRSV)*

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

<sup>2</sup>As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;

<sup>3</sup>the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.’ ”

<sup>4</sup>John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup>Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

*John the Baptist*

Of the four New Testament Gospels, only two, Matthew and Luke, tell the birth stories of Jesus. Thus, it seems odd that today’s scripture passage would be taken from Mark’s Gospel. Yet, we are in the church season of Advent, when we anticipate and prepare for the coming of our Lord, Jesus Christ. It is the time of year when we need truly to hear John the Baptist’s proclamation of the Messiah’s coming.

The story of John’s birth is told in Luke’s gospel (1:5-25). His parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, were childless and “getting on in years” when an angel, Gabriel, brought to them God’s promise of a child, whom they were to name John. Gabriel told them that John was to be raised for an ascetic life, avoiding “wine and strong drink” as he, with the spirit and power of Elijah, would turn “many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.” Luke tells us that Elizabeth was a relative of Mary, the mother of Jesus, making John and Jesus cousins of some sort.

When Mark introduces us to John the Baptist at the beginning of his gospel, John is living in the wilderness on locusts and honey, dressed in animal skin. He is proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and is actually performing some sort of ceremonial washing or plunging in the Jordan River. This all seems pretty strange to us, but it would not have been strange to Jews of Jesus’ day.

### The Gospel of Mark

The Gospel of Mark was probably the first of the four gospels to be written, in perhaps 60-65AD. Mark is also the shortest of the gospels. Mark’s dramatic narrative is very action-oriented. It opens at the commencement of Jesus’ public ministry and races on to Jesus’ crucifixion and the empty tomb. Mark wants to convince his readers that Jesus could truly be the rejected Messiah, indeed, the suffering son of God. This was a hard sale. In the minds of Jews and Gentiles alike, the claim of a suffering Messiah was absurd, much less the idea that God himself would die on a Roman cross.

Jesus was born into a world of turmoil and trouble. The Jews believed that they were God's chosen people, but they had labored under the ungodly oppression of foreign rulers and assorted pretenders for centuries. The Jews anxiously looked forward to the day when God's promises to them would be kept and a messenger (see the quotes from Isaiah in today's scripture) would come to announce the long-awaited arrival of God's kingdom. Thus, when people heard of John out there in the Jordan wilderness plunging people into the river and announcing the forgiveness of their sins, many flocked to him. Could this be, they asked. Might John be Elijah? Might he even be the Messiah himself? Is our story finally come to its climax?!

More than 1200 years before John, Joshua had led the Israelites across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land. Ever since, the Jordan River had been a symbol of salvation and hope. In baptizing people in the Jordan River, John was symbolically reenacting the crossing of the river. People came to be washed in the river, to give up their old ways, to be part of the renewed people of the covenant. John's baptism was all about salvation, creation, new birth, and hope. Yet . . . John pointed the people to the one "more powerful than I who is coming after me" (v.7) who would baptize, not with water, but with the Holy Spirit (v. 8). Thus, we shouldn't be surprised that Jesus told Nicodemus, "no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit" (John 3:5). Entering God's renewed people is a crossing over from an old life to a new life.

### *Plunging into Christmas*

Every year, in Advent, we are called to prepare for the coming of the Messiah, our Lord, and the arrival of God's kingdom. We need to capture for ourselves and our families the excitement that drove throngs of people to John the Baptist at the Jordan River. They sensed that something very profound was happening. They desperately wanted to be part of the God's renewed people. They wanted the rebirth and new creation promised by John's act of plunging them into the river. We too, ought to plunge into the

#### **Baptism**

We think of *baptism* as only a church word. But in Jesus' day, the Greek word *baptizo* meant simply to "plunge" or "dip" or "splash" or even "drown." Though there was some precedent for ceremonial washing in Judaism, the only people who got a full immersion were non-Jews converting to Judaism. Thus, when John told people that they needed to come and be washed in the Jordan for repentance of their sins, it was probably offensive to many Jews. After all, sins were to be forgiven at the Temple, but here was John, plunging people into a river for the forgiveness of sins! Certainly, John's actions and message set him up in opposition to Herod and the leaders of the religious establishment. Not surprisingly, John met an early death just as did his cousin, Jesus. John was beheaded by Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great (see Matt 14:3-12).

Christmas season. Not just for all the gift-giving, family gatherings, and wonderful feasts, as joyous as all that might be, but for the renewal and rebirth that we all desire and need. We too seek the "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29). Hallelujah!

#### *Next Week*

Our scripture passage for next week is Isaiah 61:1-4. In these verses, Isaiah paints a concrete picture of the coming of the Messiah who will bring Good News to the oppressed and brokenhearted. When Jesus returns to his hometown at the beginning of his public ministry, he rises to read these verses from Isaiah and announces their fulfillment ~ that the day of the Lord had come.

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<b>Day 1</b> Isaiah 40:1-11 The promised coming of God's kingdom	<b>Day 2</b> Luke 1:5-24 The announcement and birth of John the Baptist
<b>Day 3</b> Luke 3:1-22 Luke's telling of John's ministry at the Jordan River	<b>Day 4</b> John 3:1-21 Jesus and Nicodemus
<b>Day 5</b> Matthew 14:1-13 The death of John the Baptist	Weekly Prayer Concerns

## Sermon Notes

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### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. I suspect that most of us don't usually link together baptism and the Christmas season. But baptism is a rebirth, an act of new creation. It is a crossing into the Promised Land, God's kingdom, which ought to point us to the coming of Jesus Christ. What does your own baptism mean to you? Or the baptism of your children? What do you think John means when he says that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit? How could we incorporate our baptisms into the Christmas season?
2. John proclaims a baptism, a plunging, of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. To repent is not simply to be sorry for what you've done, but to turn 180° from the direction you've been headed. Thus, people brought their sins to the river, were plunged into it by John, and, metaphorically at least, crossed the river into God's renewed people. In practice, most of us find it pretty hard to leave behind all our sins and regrets. It much more likely that we'll hang on to them until we drown in the river! How do we go about truly leaving behind all our "baggage" - our sins, our mistakes, our regrets - and embracing the true meaning of Advent and Christmas? How do we truly, practically, receive the forgiveness freely offered us by God?
3. John's vocation was to announce the coming of the Messiah, the Lamb of God. The arrival of the Messiah also meant the arrival of God's kingdom, for the Messiah was the Anointed One who would usher in the new age. What do think is meant by the arrival of God's kingdom? What is God's kingdom like? Given all the trouble and tragedy and pain in our world, does it even make sense to claim that Jesus ushered in God's kingdom? Next week, we'll be taking a closer look at what we mean by God's kingdom.