

January 10, 2021

Mark 1: 1-11

Acts 19: 1-7

Remember your Baptism
The Reverend Amy Ruhf

I want to share a story with all of you today. A story of how I came to be baptized, of how I learned of Jesus the Christ...

I was there with my family – there on the banks of the Jordan, there with hundreds of other people. It was a crowded river bank. Some people were washing their clothes, others were fetching water, still others were watering their animals. I heard the sound of the willows rustling in the breeze, and smelled a mixture of sweet flowering plants, and musky, wet, moss.

I have been coming to the Jordan for a long time. Every time we go, my father will go on and on about how important this river is to our family. You see, we were date farmers. Our farm was in the Jordan River Valley, a lush green valley with rich soil. The river provides us with the water we need for our farm, our way of life.

Water has always fascinated me... it amazes me how one little molecule can bring about all of life. We depend on water for everything; for food, for cultivation, for living. We are even made up of water! Water has a tremendous power. Too much of it and it can become lethal, too little, and survival becomes impossible. The Jordan runs from the sea of Galilee in the north to the Dead Sea in the south. Its waters provide food and habitation for many animals and plants. I have seen hundreds of different types of birds sheltering in the vegetation for which the river provides water. With so much desert all around, my family and I know well the importance of water. We have seen and endured both the power of drought and flood. The Jordan is the great caretaker of the people of Israel. It provides us with the majority of our food and water sources.

But more than that, my father tells of how important this river is to all of Israel.

Every time we reach the river bank, my father tells me the story of Joshua and how he led the refugees from the house of Jacob across the bank and into Canaan, the promised land that was said to be flowing with milk and honey. When I was a young child, I would imagine myself standing at the river's edge with Joshua, excited to finally reach the place that God had promised my family; terrified of what lay in store, but thrilled at the prospect of the adventure. I would imagine myself stepping my toes into the water and feeling those waters roll back just as they had done for Moses at the red sea. I would listen to my father recount the history of our people and imagine myself in each story; fighting alongside Gideon, running from Saul with David, crossing the Jordan with Judas Macabbeus to rescue my fellow Israelites at Carnaim...

Then, all of a sudden, I was jolted from my daydream of days long gone by a man shouting in the Jordan. He was the one they call the baptizer and he was calling people to him to be baptized in the waters of the Jordan.

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I wondered at this... what it all meant to be baptized. Ritual washing was part of life as a good Jew, but this seemed a bit different. The people he was calling to didn't have ailments which required washing, yet they were coming in droves to the man. He looked a bit scary to me. Perhaps even a bit mad. They said he was a hermit of sorts... lives alone in the desert and eats what he can find... locusts, honey, and the like. He was disheveled in appearance, wearing animal skins. I thought, "he must get awful hot in clothes like that out in the desert."

Before I knew it, my father was ushering us towards the scary man, telling us to listen to what he was saying. He urged us all to turn our thoughts and hearts inward – to repent – to turn about and go in a new direction because someone important was coming, someone who would save all of Israel. I wasn't sure what he meant by "new direction." What did he mean? My father explained it this way: To change my way of thinking from thinking about all the things happening in the world, to stop thinking only of my next meal or how the harvest would do, or the continuing oppression of the Romans, but to think on God and God's promises. Then I waded out to this strange man named John, and he dunked me under the water. At first I thought I might drown. But then he drew me back out of the water and I felt refreshed and renewed.

As I was leaving, I saw a man with many followers going down to John. John said something to him, but I was too far away to hear. I felt like my outlook on life had changed that day, like I was able to go in a new direction. I remember that day so well and so clearly.

That feeling never left me and I found that I wanted to devote myself more fully to God. Eventually I moved to Ephesus and that's where I met Paul. It's been 20 years since I was baptized by John in the Jordan, and now this Paul fellow is asking about this thing called the Holy Spirit. I didn't know what he was talking about, but as I listened to him I recalled John's words: "someone greater than I is coming after me. I baptize with water, but he will baptize with the Holy Spirit." That's who Paul was talking about. That man was Jesus, the Christ. As I heard Paul talk about Jesus, I wondered if that man I saw as I was departing from John all those years ago might not have been him. I remember he had a look about him that I was drawn to, but I didn't know why.

I decided right then and there that I wanted to be baptized in Jesus' name. I remember well the feeling of being baptized by John, that amazing feeling of renewal and refreshment, of feeling like my life was now headed in a different direction. I wondered with excitement what being baptized in Jesus' name might mean. As I talked with Paul, he explained to me that being baptized into Christ is like being adopted into Jesus' family. He told me that my baptism in Jesus signed me and sealed me, marking me as one of God's beloved. I remarked to Paul that I and my family had always kept to the Torah, circumcising our male children at 7 days old. Doesn't that mark us as belonging to God? Paul went on and explained that before I chose God, God chose me, and that through my baptism into Jesus' family, I would recognize the holy spirit living within me, which had been there all along, but to which I was unaware.

This baptism that I was about to receive was one which would sign and seal me, much like the seal that Paul used to seal his letters to the churches. Though this seal would not be made of clay or wax, or any substance, but of the Holy Spirit herself, marking me as God's own. My baptism, Paul explained, was to be an outward sign of an inward grace – the grace of God made known through Jesus and given to me freely. I wanted to know more. What would happen after this baptism? What would I feel? What would be different? Paul couldn't answer me for certain, but Paul knew that something would happen, something that would indicate that the Holy Spirit had come alive in me and that I would be able to listen to her, and act through her.

For the second time in my life, I entered the waters of baptism with a few others who were with me. My heart pounded with excitement (and if I'm honest, with a little trepidation) as I awaited what would happen. I had learned over the years, that when you encounter the Holy Spirit, anything can happen. When I came up

from the water, something miraculous happened. I was speaking a different language... a language I did not know, but one that one of the brothers beside me did know. He told me all that I was saying about Jesus, and I was astounded that such words could be coming from my own lips, was in a language I did not know. It was a miracle.

Paul stayed with us for a while in Ephesus, and the number among us grew. As we learned more of Jesus and his Kingdom, people sought us out to hear the good news. I opened my home to the followers of the way, and we met and shared meals daily. We held all things in common and everyone among us had enough. We were now all part of the same family; adopted as children of God. We no longer belonged to our own families, or to ourselves, but we were now all part of God's family, chosen before we could choose; offered grace upon grace for the building up of God's kingdom on earth. My life was forever changed.

As I have grown older I tell the story of my baptism by John, and then later by Paul, to my children and to their children and to all who might hear it. The baptism of repentance I received through John helped me to change directions and to go in a new way – to follow after God more closely and intimately than ever before. That change of heart and mind and soul led me to be baptized in the name of Jesus some years later. I see the two as linked together; inextricably connected. The change of direction that led me to examine my heart and to seek after God, led me to Jesus himself and through the gift of his Holy Spirit, I was adopted into God's family; claimed as God's beloved child.

I will forever remember my baptism into God's family where I was loved for who I am because of God's great love. I didn't do anything to earn it: moreover, I couldn't have done anything to earn it. God adopted me because of who God is, marked me as one of God's own, and gave me the gift of the ability to recognize the very spirit of God dwelling within me and through which I can hear God whispering quietly in my ear, directing my steps, and walking with me my whole life long.

So to you who hear my story today, remember your baptism. Tell your children and your children's children about it. Help them to remember that they are the beloved of God, that God chooses them, even when they are too young to remember. Tell them about their own baptisms and the miracle that took place when they too were signed and sealed by God. Tell them of Jesus and all that Jesus has done – about the grace freely offered by him to everyone. Remember the promises made to you at your baptism and the promises you made to your children and children's children at theirs. Remember to listen to that still small voice within you, whispering over and over again that here you are accepted, here you are loved, here you are family.

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