

REMEMBERING WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT

Mark 1:3-11 & Romans 6:1-11

One of the wettest days I can remember was the day of our daughter Lucy's wedding. It was coming down in buckets and the wind was blowing the rain sideways. The rectory was across the street and about 100 yards down from the church. I had been back and forth several times in my dual role as father of the bride and Rector of the church making sure everyone was ready, the ushers in place doing their jobs, waiting for late arrivals, and ferrying messages and umbrellas each trip. My shoes were soaked. I did have the presence of mind to wear an old pair and have my good shoes under a bench in the narthex. I wrapped my raincoat tightly around me to make sure the same fate didn't befall my new suit. There's a wedding picture I particularly treasure of me holding a big umbrella and walking my daughter from the rectory to the church as the rain pelted down on us. Lucy is in flip flops holding up the trim and train of her beautiful wedding dress and carrying her wedding shoes in a plastic bag.

My brother Dave who preached at my celebration of new ministry also preached at our daughter's wedding. He began his sermon by telling Lucy that he wanted her to remember this day as "*absolutely perfect. The sun was shining and there wasn't a cloud in the sky.*"

Memory is a funny thing. A wedding is typically one of the most stressful days in a bride's life. And yet most brides recall their wedding as one of the most wonderful days in their lives. **Meaning shapes memory.** *A man says that the birth of his child was a joy. Truth is, it was absolute misery to watch his wife suffer through labor, but the meaning of childbirth makes the memory a positive one.* ("The Memory of Baptism", Homiletics magazine, January, 2009, p. 19)

While we haven't forgotten how much rain fell on our daughter's wedding day, we do recall the day as perfect. In fact the picture on the front of our daughter's wedding book shows the bride and groom smiling in the sunshine. For by the end of the reception the clouds had parted, the sun came out and many beautiful outdoor pictures were taken.

Today is the day when we remember Jesus' baptism and recall also the meaning of our own baptisms. In the 6th chapter of his letter to the Romans Paul asks them to recall their baptisms:

Do you not know (in other words, remember) that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

Those early Christians could well remember their baptisms. It would have been a very significant moment for them to profess their faith in Jesus out loud before the other small band of Christians, confess their sins, to go down completely into the water and be raised up dripping wet, a newborn child of God. *Remember that event*, Paul tells the Romans.

In your baptism you died with Christ; you joined him in death on the cross. And as you came out of the water you joined him also in his call to live a completely new life.

My guess is that not many of us actually remember our baptisms. [Zoe, who is being baptized this morning, probably won't remember her baptism either. Although I hope that her parents, godparents and sister remember the day for her and tell how important it is.] But while we may not remember that moment when most of us were quite small, we can recall the meaning of our baptism.

One of the things that has always struck me in the Gospel account of Jesus' baptism is how viscerally he remembered his baptism by John in the Jordan River. "*And just as he was coming up out of the water,*" Mark tells us, "*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.*" Well, how could Mark possibly know that at the moment of his baptism Jesus himself *saw* the heavens literally *ripped* apart? And how could Mark know that Jesus *experienced* the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove? And how could Mark know that Jesus *heard* a voice from heaven proclaim, "*you are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased?*" Jesus must have told him. Or Jesus told his disciples and they told Mark. The event was so important to Jesus that he told others about it.

As Mark and the other three Gospel writers portray Jesus' baptism it is his *call narrative*. This was the moment Jesus realized who he was and how he had been called by God. He realized that God was in a special and unique way, his Father and he was God's Son. He saw the barrier between heaven and earth ripped asunder. He then began his ministry and did unimaginably heavenly things, speaking with great authority and power, forgiving sins, calling people to enter into God's Kingdom, healing the sick, casting out demons and raising the dead. Jesus experienced the Holy Spirit coming upon him. And from that moment he was aware of being filled with the presence of God. Did Jesus experience those things about himself before his baptism? We don't know. But clearly from this point on Jesus does have a clear sense of himself as God's anointed, the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

What should we recall about Jesus' baptism? Just 3 verses earlier in the opening words of his Gospel, Mark wrote, "*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*" We should remember Jesus' baptism as the starting point of that good news. He hears the voice from heaven proclaim, "*You are my Son, the Beloved.*" It is not only the point where Jesus clearly recognizes who he is, it is also the fulfillment of time. From this moment on the Kingdom of God is at hand. God is breaking through into our world, into our lives.

Jesus saw *the heavens torn apart*. The same word for *torn* or *ripped* apart is also heard in the end of the Gospel when Mark wrote that at the moment of Jesus' death "*the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.*" (Mark 15:38) The curtain at the center of the Holy Temple, where the presence of God was shrouded from sight and contact,

was ripped apart, just like the heavens at Jesus' baptism. God's living presence was no longer to be contained in the temple but was everywhere present through Jesus.

Jesus' baptism may have looked to an outsider just like any of the other baptisms John performed that day in the River Jordan. But this baptism was different because Jesus was different. They came to have their sins washed away and as a sign of their repentance entering into a new life. Jesus did not come to repent of his sins and be cleansed from them. He came to be the holy offering by which our sins and the sins of the whole world might be forgiven and cleansed.

What ought we to remember as most important about our baptisms, even if we don't recall the actual event? We should remember our baptisms as the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ in us.

- Our baptisms are where the heavens are torn open and God's possibilities lie open before us.
- Our baptisms are where God claims us as his own beloved children.
- Our baptisms are where we become part become part of God's family, where we become full members of His Church, where we become brothers and sisters with one another.
- Our baptisms are the place where we come to repent and turn away from the things we have done wrong and make a new beginning in God.
- In our baptisms our sins are washed clean and we are forgiven.
- Our baptisms are where we are commissioned to serve as Christ served, to meet him in our care for people in need and in our work for justice for all who are oppressed.
- Our baptisms are where we join with Jesus on the hard wood of the cross and die with him. There are so many tears, so much brokenness, so much hurt, so many wrongs, so much pain that we share with Jesus on that cross. We join him in that agony of love he bore for a broken world and for our broken selves.
- And our baptisms are the place where we rise dripping wet with Jesus to the joy of new life – to a claim on us which is eternal, to a resurrected life that continues beyond the grave, to a joy that surpasses all pain and brokenness.

We may not remember much about the baptism itself, but we should let the meaning of baptism shape our remembrance. So, when we recall our baptisms we should remember it as the key moment – the beginning place – of the good news of Jesus Christ in us.
Amen.