

Second Reformed Church, Pella, Iowa  
Steve Mathonnet-VanderWell, preaching  
Mark 1:1-11  
Baptismal Life: Continual Conversion

January 8, 2012

During the civil rights struggles of the early 1960's, it was reported that police in southern cities would begin to spray protestors with high pressure fire hoses. When Martin Luther King Jr.—lest we forget, a Baptist preacher—was asked about this new danger, he is reported to have said, “It won't bother us. We're Baptists. We've been wet before.”

Now we aren't Baptist, but we are baptized. And while I certainly hope none of us are sprayed with fire hoses in the coming year, I do hope we can be like King, in that baptism, being wet with the grace of God, shapes our self-understanding. Like King, let us not be afraid because we know we are baptized.

We read the account of Jesus' baptism found in the Gospel of Mark—the very beginning of Mark's Gospel. Mark's Gospel is presumed to be the very first written account of Jesus. Matthew and Luke's Gospels build upon, expand on, what Mark laid down. Mark's Gospel is known to be concise and brisk. We often note how Mark has no Christmas story—no time for or maybe no knowledge of Jesus' birth or childhood. When Mark's Gospel begins, Jesus is a 30 year old man seeking to be baptized by John.

I hope you could sense Mark's taut and sparse tone in the story. The line that jumped out at me was “the heavens were torn apart.” As Jesus comes up out of the water, the heavens were ripped open. Perhaps we should say here is Mark's account of Christmas. The heavens were ripped apart. Whatever barrier had seemingly stood between God and his creation, it was now gone. God had come among us. The heavens have been torn open.

A well-known New Testament specialist puts it this way, “In the Bible, ‘heaven’ and ‘earth’ are not like oil and water, resisting one another and separating themselves out. According to the ancient Israelite scriptures heaven and earth were the twin halves of God's created reality designed eventually to come together. Supposing that what has kept them apart all this time is that the human creatures who were put in charge of the ‘earthly’ part of this creation had rebelled, and that their rebellion had erected a barrier wall, a membrane, that seemed strong enough and thick enough for ‘earth’ to declare its independence, the desire to rule itself. But supposing then, that the creator God had finally come in person to break that barrier, puncture that membrane?”

There are other examples in the Bible where this barrier or membrane is broken--Jacob's ladder, Jesus' transfiguration, the stoning of Stephen in the book of Acts. But in the Gospel of Mark, the supreme example, the ripping open of the heavens is here at Jesus' baptism. There is now a hole in the sky. God has come into our world. Heaven and earth are rejoined. God is now among us and we also are raised up, invited into God's heavenly realm. Still today, because of Jesus Christ, we live a world where the heavens have been ripped open and God can come among us.

If you've been paying much attention over the years at our worship on these "Baptism of our Lord" Sundays, you noticed—I hope—that our emphasis in baptism is always God's promise, God's initiative, God's remembering, God saying "yes" to us in Jesus Christ. In our service of baptism we hear the words, "We love God because God first loved us." Our focus is more on what God has done for us, than what we must do for God. Then, secondarily, in response, our echo, is our life as a disciple, serving, loving, sharing.

But because it is secondary, our response, our yes can seem to get lost in the shuffle, overlooked, perhaps even seem unimportant. But there is a time and a need to focus on our response to God. And for the next few weeks that is what Sophie and I intend to do. To look at the baptismal life. How do live as baptized people. What does it mean to say "yes" back to the God who has sought us out and said "yes" to us. We're calling it continual conversion. That following Jesus is not a onetime thing, a decision locked in our past. Nor is a frantic effort to manufacture some mountaintop experience of changed. Instead, it is continually turning toward Christ, continually being attentive and awake to God, consciously living our faith in our everyday life, intentionally making effort to live and grow as grateful children of God.

Because the focus is first and foremost on God's promise, God's yes, one person commented that we tend to take God's grace for granted. He didn't mean that positively. But as I thought about that comment, I thought in some ways I do want my children to take me and my love for granted. I want them to know from the top of their head to the tip of their toes, to the marrow of their bones to depth of their soul, that I am always there for them, that my love is unconditional—that is always a given. Please, always take that for granted. That isn't to say I want my kids to ignore me, only, only have a hand-out wanting more, never to say "thanks." But even should they do all those things, still they can take my love for granted.

So our challenge, my invitation to you, is to take God's love for you for granted, in a way that motivates you to love in response. As baptized people, God's love for you is certain—an unshakeable given. Now as baptized people, how do live lives of continual conversion? Neither sleep walking nor being frantic in our life, but being attentive and intentional, continuing to seek, to be refreshed and renewed. In these winter weeks, we will look at practices and traits, habits and attitudes that might allow us to wake up to God's love, to appreciate our relationship with Jesus, to evaluate and be more intentional about our lives as Jesus' disciples.

The story of Jesus' baptism always falls very near New Years. That is, I suppose a good thing and a bad thing. This is a time when many of us are re-evaluating and working on self-improvement—although studies seem to show that by the 8<sup>th</sup> day of January, most of us have broken our new year's resolutions. But the celebration of Jesus is a time for us to evaluate, to recommit. But it would be a mistake to hear my message today or the call of Jesus' baptism as just more new year's resolutions. New Year's resolutions are typically rather narrowly focused, "I won't do this anymore" and they are often based on the assumption that our willpower works sort of like a light switch—it is either on or off. Break your resolution once, and the energy is gone, the resolution done. One and done.

What Sophie and I will be talking about are much deeper broader inclinations, that can't be categorized as either yes/no, success/fail. Often the deepest changes are those where we do not really even fully understand where we are headed, what are trying to do, until years into the process. You begin golfing without any understanding of the nuances and depth of the game, you might discover in 30 years of playing. You make marriage vows with no full appreciation of what you are saying "yes" to—the years, the tragedies, the roller coaster ride. So likewise, what I am talking about today is not "I resolve in 2012 to be nicer person and a better Christian." Instead, now is the time to consider your Christian life broadly, deeply, patiently, gently, intentionally. The baptismal life—continual conversion is more like a glacier, moving slowly but carving deeply.

On this Sunday we offer you the opportunity to renew your baptismal vows, to say "yes" again to Jesus Christ. We need every once in a while to reclaim it, be reminded of its life-altering significance, to leave another milestone on our journey. No one can force and manipulate genuine holy moments, but I hope, I invite, you in these next minutes to be especially awake and open to the Holy Spirit.

I hope that in saying yes for 2012, you are saying yes to some of the steps and ideas we will be sharing in the next few weeks, that you are saying yes to continual conversion, that you saying yes to being a dedicated, alert follower of Jesus, saying yes to being wet with God's love, saying yes to the love of Jesus.