



“CAMEL’S HAIR AND LOW FLYING DOVES”
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Mark 1:4-11

Today is the baptism of our Lord Sunday. It is the first official Sunday after Epiphany. You all remember Epiphany, one of those wonderful seasons. We sing about the Wise Men, those three fellows that we attribute to story and song, but the wise men that came from the east, who brought gifts to Jesus and to the mother and the father of Jesus. They brought gold, frankincense and myrrh. We remember them and we honor them at Epiphany for a special reason. That is, Epiphany is the revelation of God to the entire world that this child who was born to a specific time and place, to a specific people is not intended to stay as such. He is not just for that small community, but rather he came for the entire world. And it would be foreigners, strangers, we would call them today, from Iran, they were from the east, that far east had followed a star. These were astrologers, not astronomers. These were astrologers. These were the kind of guys that made predictions based upon the positioning of the stars in the heavens. They did that for a living. That was their job, but they found a peculiar star and they would come and they would share their good news about this star that they saw in the east that they had heard in stories of old that would predict the coming of a new king. So these star gazers, these wise men, astrologers came all the way to Bethlehem, visited Mary and Joseph and this child Jesus who, by the way, was probably around two years old. You know the crèches don’t do justice to the real story, but they came to see him at about two years old and they brought their gifts of royalty, their gifts that were intended for royalty, gold frankincense and myrrh. Some of those gifts were absolutely appropriate and other gifts were off the wall, bizarre. Myrrh, for instance, is a burial spice. Why in the world would you give that to a child, but they did.

Now the Gospel writers have talked about that, Matthew specifically. Matthew is the one who mentions the wise men from the east, but it is in this season of Epiphany in which God is making God’s word known and revealed to the entire world and now we are in the very first Sunday in this season of Epiphany. And the very first Sunday in the season of Epiphany is the Sunday in which we celebrate the baptism of Jesus Christ because that is the very first place where God, God’s self, speaks “Behold, this is my Son, the beloved in whom I am well pleased.”

Invariably every year when we get around to talking about the baptism of Jesus there is always that nagging question that some folks have so I was going to address that this morning. The nagging question is very simple. Go with me if you will to that scripture passage. Open your Bibles, if you would, I don’t do this very often but we got them in the pews, you can use them, and they’re good. Open that up to that scripture reading. I want you to see a couple verses here that I think are of such great importance that we need to spend a moment or two on these because this is the nagging question that folks want to have.

If you look there in verse 4, the very first verse that we started with today, that Bonnie read to us, it says that John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness. Now get this, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John the Baptist was baptizing people in order to forgive sins. Now here’s the kicker. You all think that baptism is a relatively New Testament concept. It is not. It is a very old Jewish concept. Baptism as a matter of fact has been what we would call the rituals of purification. The historians, the archeologists that have dug up the Essene community at Qumran - where we get the Dead Sea scrolls - have found several places where baptism was a routine part of this Jewish community, this non-Christian community, this Jewish community. Baptism was such a vital part of their daily lives that before they would ever start their scribal work and most of the

Essenes in this community of Qumran along the Dead Sea that's what they did, they recopied scripture by hand in the scroll format. Before they could ever do that they had to go through a system of purification. They would go through seven individual pools of water to purify themselves as a ritual of purification. They were dunked seven times. Baptism is not a New Testament concept my friends.

So John has come along and he's offering this ritual of purification. Now albeit it's in a very strange place, it's in the middle of the Jordan River. Have you ever been in a river lately? I went down to the Rio Grande River and I tell you one thing, I don't think I'd ever get out of the boat. It's peculiar to think about some of our rivers, but John is in the midst of the Jordan River. Of course they didn't have all of the pollution that we have, but in the middle of the Jordan River this is a different place than is normally associated with baptism with this ritual of purification. John is proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. A baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; which is this ritual of purification. It's odd because when you look at that scripture and it talks about him in verse 6 "Now John was clothed with camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, he ate locusts and wild honey." This fellow was not your typical priest. Oh he had some of the accoutrements of being a priest. He had a cincture around his waist. It happened to be leather instead of a rope. It happened to be that his robe was not of linen but was of camel's hair. His diet was not necessarily the diet prescribed in scripture unless you consider that John was probably a Nazirite, which means that he was eating that diet. But John, nonetheless, is fulfilling the prophecy. John is the priest who is proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin.

In the midst of all of this I want you to hear that statement one more time. He proclaimed a baptism of repentance - to turn back Godward - for the forgiveness of sin -and what is sin but that which separates us from God and in the middle of this, this fellow Jesus shows up. Do you have the question in mind yet? Do you know what it is? "Why would Jesus need to be baptized?" He was born without sin. Mark even answers that question before it is even asked. Just before that John proclaims, verse 7, "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." Now here it is verse 8. "I have baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Why did Jesus need to be baptized? It wasn't for his own remission of sin. It was so Jesus could receive the Holy Spirit, which is what happens there in verse 10 and 11. "And just as he was coming out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And voice came from heaven: 'you are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased'."

Folks, when you look at Jesus and the understanding of what sin is all about, if all it could take would be just a bath to wash away our sins why would Jesus come? If we could do it all with a bar of Lava soap - okay Lifeboy, I don't care what you like, it doesn't matter - if we could do it with a bar of soap why do we need a savior? The reason is because this Savior is the One who is going to clean us for us because we can't do it ourselves. Sin has such a powerful hold on the human race because it's a part of who we are. It's the result of free will, the freedom of choice and it's because of sin that we need a Savior. You all remember during Christmas time and Advent time we were talking about all of this. It was the notion that we had to have a Savior because there was no other way. We were always going to be lost. We were always going to be wandering around. We would never ever make it otherwise. We would always be estranged from God and the thing that caused our estrangement was none other than our own sin.

So John comes and he proclaims a baptism of repentance. Get yourself ready. Get ready because it is about to happen. Prepare the way in the wilderness. Make straight a path in the desert and the highway for our God who is approaching to us. He is coming to us. We can't go to him, but he's coming to us. Get ready! And John comes proclaiming a baptism of repentance - getting ready

for the forgiveness of sins. Get ready for the forgiveness of sins. It's coming and it's going to come to us in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Mark's Gospel, as a matter of fact, will lay out no less than four times where this revelation takes place. This Holy Spirit is directly related to God in Jesus Christ. Four times God will put his hand upon Jesus in this scripture. Here's the first. The second you remember is the transfiguration. Jesus is up on the mountain with Peter, James and John and lo and behold Moses and Elijah shows up and you hear a booming voice in the middle of the world on top of this mountain, of course this is right after Peter says, "hey, let's pitch a tent up here and stay awhile, this is kind of cool" and God says, "This is my Beloved Son in whom I'm well pleased. Listen to him." The third time Jesus is before Pilate and he is being tried and Pilate asks him about the kingdom of this world. Jesus responds this is not about this world. This is about God's kingdom. And the fourth time is the revelation to another person, a Centurion standing there at the foot of the cross and he says, "This truly is the Son of God."

God is in the business of revealing God's power to us through this person Jesus Christ. God wants us to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that this Jesus Christ is not just another king. He's not just another prophet. He's not just another miracle worker. He's not just an itinerant preacher. He is God's Son and through him comes the Holy Spirit. Without Him we're lost. Soap won't do it.

We can get all hung up on John. We can get all hung up on his clothes, camel's hair. Today that's probably pretty expensive but back in those days it was pretty weird. We can get all hung up on his diet except we all know that there are folks who do that today. Euell Gibbons, I used to remember him, "do you know that many parts of a television set are edible?"

You know there's this part of us that says that diet is everything and that's what we are going on. We've got these fad diets today, but we can get all hung up on John, but don't get hung up on John. John is fulfilling the prophecy to allow us to know Jesus. John is not the big guy here. John's not the one who is trying to redeem Jesus. He's not baptizing him to redeem him. That's what repentance and forgiveness of sin really means. John's not doing that. John himself even admits it. "I'm not worthy to stoop down and untie his shoes."

There was a conversation that George and I were a part of earlier this week in our lectionary group with other preachers and one of the other pastors is also preaching this passage and she was talking about envisioning John in his camel hair coat that was probably sleeveless and you know he probably had biceps about that big and just as big brawny guy. We almost think of him as Arnold Schwarzenegger. You know, "he's going to pump you up!" He's John the Baptist! But he says "there is one who is even mightier than I am who is coming." John puts himself in his own place, muscles or no muscles. John knows. Don't get hung up on John. John is offering the baptism for Jesus not for his remission of sin but so that we can be baptized in the same spirit that Jesus was.

That is what this Sunday is all about, that when we take this thing up called a Baptismal Font and we sprinkle it on babies and adults. It's not the water that does it. It's what happens when we proclaim it in Jesus name - in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit - in the name of the Trinity - the Holy Spirit comes upon you and it is the same Holy Spirit. You've got the same baptism. That's what John was saying. "Oh, I baptize you with water, but He's going to baptize you with the Holy Spirit!" Later on we hear Jesus even saying, "I'm going to ask the Father and He's going to send to you an advocate, this Holy Spirit." Jesus will say in a later place, "Greater things than you've seen me do, *you* will do because of this Spirit."

The Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ on this particular Sunday, the first Sunday in Epiphany is the baptism that gives us a revelation of God's love for all of us and God does not want sin to win. God wants us all to have the power of the Holy Spirit and that's the greatest revelation of all in Jesus

Christ, that God loves us so much that God would not even withhold not just his only Son and that God would not withhold his Holy Spirit.

With that, don't you feel a little bit more empowered in this world, to take on anything and everything that gets in the way of God's kingdom. You've got God's Holy Spirit. Go into the world with it and see what can't be done. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen!