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 Texts: Mark 1: 4-11; Acts 19:1-7  
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### Remember Your Baptism

I want to begin by acknowledging the circumstances in which we find ourselves today. Winter has found us, which means that for the last few days, many of us have woken up to houses that are colder than usual. I hope you're staying warm – the church is here if you need it, and it is warm in here. But it's also true that many of us find ourselves in a posture that we hoped we wouldn't need to revisit, isolating at home while the virus spreads around us. Some among us, I know, have gotten sick, though thankfully, from what I gather the effects have been mild. In the midst of it all, it's easy to feel discouraged. What I wish to offer today is a word of encouragement, which can be summed up in the title of this sermon – remember your baptism. I'll say more about that in a little, but for now, know that it's simply a way of saying: you can do this. You've got what it takes. We'll continue to get through this together.

But I also want to speak to a wider sense of discouragement that many of us seem to be feeling, stemming from the suspicion that our country and our world are spiraling toward a major crisis. What with an unending pandemic, ongoing climate disasters, conspiracy theories circulating among people who ought to know better, and chatter among the talking heads that we're marching toward civil war, it's a wonder that any of us are keeping it together these days. I'll simply note by way of parenthesis that I don't find that civil war talk especially persuasive, but that's another matter for another time. For now, I merely wish to acknowledge the feeling among us that we're standing at the edge of a catastrophe, along with the accompanying sense that there are things we ought to be doing to mitigate that danger.

I mention all of that not only because it forms our cultural surround just now, but because the story of Jesus speaks directly into that sense of catastrophe. The gospels show how he navigated the disaster that was unfolding around him, and how he confronted that sense of doom with a mixture of compassion, wit, and moral determination. A great deal of that story is revealed in the encounter that Jesus has with John the Baptist in the River of Jordan, which is how the liturgical calendar unfolds at the start of a new year. What I'd like to do today is to unpack what was taking place around Jesus and John, and to show you how and why it would have been understood as a disaster. There are some remarkable parallels with our own time. And then I'd like to fasten upon the act of baptism that Jesus chooses for himself, and what those words spoken to him upon his emergence from the waters mean – for him, but for you and for me as well.

Let's start with some history. (Let me say that I'm drawing here from an outstanding little book that our friend Mark Braverman sent to me last year, called *Jesus Before Christianity*, by a South African theologian named Albert Nolan.)<sup>1</sup> The Romans colonized Palestine in 63 BC. The Roman policy was to appoint native rulers within each of their colonies, and so a man named Herod the Great was eventually proclaimed the king of the Jews. Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great. But that Herod died, and the territory was divided into three districts, each governed by one of Herod's sons – who were also called, guess what...Herod.

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<sup>1</sup> *Jesus Before Christianity*, by Albert Nolan (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978). See especially pgs. 10-19.

But this is where things get interesting. One of those Herods, Archelaus, who governed Judea and Samaria, where Jerusalem and its environs were located, couldn't maintain control of the people, and so he was deposed by the Romans, and replaced by a Roman ruler, which began a period of direct rule by the Romans. That began the most turbulent period of ancient Jewish history, leading eventually to the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, but also of Jerusalem, and of Judea and Samaria too. Jesus was 12 when the Romans began their direct rule. Jesus's entire ministry, and the formation of the first communities of Christians, took place with all of that as a backdrop. All of the apocalyptic rhetoric in the Gospels refers to that sense of impending catastrophe that everyone, including Jesus, sensed was approaching.

Toward the beginning of Roman's direct rule, a major rebellion took place. It had to do with taxation. The Romans were taking a census of the population in order to inventory the resources that existed in Palestine. The Jewish population objected, and a man named Judas the Galilean led an uprising, which the Romans ruthlessly suppressed. Some two thousand people were crucified as a result. But that movement to overthrow the Romans continued. Those rebels were called Zealots. Their objective was the liberation of the Jews from their occupiers. For decades, they harassed the Romans with uprisings, and in AD 66 they were successful in driving the Romans out of Palestine. But the Romans responded by raising an army and marching on Palestine, wiping out the resistance.

The Zealots have a good many analogues in the modern world. They're akin to many of the armed resistance groups that we've witnessed rising up against colonial rule – think of Algeria, or the Vietnamese. Think of Haiti in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, or Cuba in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The cause is just, but the result is often a spiraling violence that ends in tragedy. Importantly, neither Jesus nor John identify with the Zealots, though the Gospel writers do go out of their way to note that Jesus attracts at least one Zealot, Simon, into his inner circle of twelve disciples.

Other groups responded to the occupation and sense of foreboding in ways different than the Zealots. There were the Essenes, who advocated a total withdrawal from society. They wished to achieve a kind of moral perfection, and so they lived in the desert as ascetics, hoping to keep themselves pure from a contaminated and unclean world. They were preparing for God's judgment, when the world would be purified and the righteous – namely, themselves – would be rewarded. It's an imperfect analogy, but that impulse too has its modern adherents, seen in those who do their best to live off the grid, or outside the strictures of an economic system that degrades both people and the planet. Such a response bears its own internal logic, and we can understand how the Essenes and their contemporary descendants might arrive at such conclusions. But again, neither John nor Jesus identify with the Essenes. In fact, the Essenes had removed themselves so far from the mainstream of ancient Judaism that the Gospel texts don't even mention them.

The two other responses to the catastrophe unfolding throughout the years of Jesus's ministry are familiar to us: the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Jesus tangled with both groups. The Pharisees were a kind of middle-class movement, more or less bourgeois in orientation. The word, "pharisee," means "the separate ones," or "the holy ones," but unlike the Essenes, they lived openly within the occupation. They thought the Romans were God's punishment upon the people of Israel for unfaithfulness, and so they created a program of ritual reforms and purifications meant to renew the covenant between God and Israel. Their system of rewards and punishments was based on the rigorous interpretation and application of the law. Still, they paid their taxes to Rome, and they refused the way of the Zealots, preferring to do their own inner

work, to use the language of our time, while awaiting the coming of a brighter age. The Pharisees too have their modern parallels, found in all of those who accommodate themselves to an order they find distasteful, while pursuing personal moral projects – wellness or wokeness or other forms of piety. Once again, it’s notable that neither Jesus nor John pursue this option.

The Sadducees are the conservatives of the time. They were the wealthiest, most aristocratic members of that society, owning most of the land. And they occupied positions of public authority. The Sadducees were what the Gospels refer to as the chief priests, the scribes, and elders. As such, they were the ones most interested in preserving the status quo. While they weren’t tax collectors – i.e., they weren’t collaborationists - they were willing to negotiate with the Romans in order to keep the peace and to maintain public order. This group, too, has its modern adherents, found in all those who appeal to notions of “law and order” whenever there is social unrest. Importantly, Jesus and John go out of their way to avoid being associated with the Sadducees. Indeed, some of the harshest language that Jesus speaks is directed at both the Sadducees and the Pharisees. “Woe to you,” Jesus says to them, “for you are whitewashed tombs.” Which is to say, “You’re keeping up appearances, but you’re dead inside.”

So who are those two individuals down at the Jordan River? John stands apart from all of those groups, and he speaks in a way that no one else at the time was speaking, which is to say, he spoke in the idiom of the prophet. His was not the language of purification, but of repentance. He didn’t believe in a coming age when the good guys would get their just deserts, while the bad guys would be punished. He didn’t believe anyone, least of all himself, could escape the coming judgment with their morals, their laws, or their piety projects. He believed the whole of society needed to undergo a conversion, which is why he appealed to the masses and the peasants. What’s interesting is that Jesus seems to have been impressed with John, and he too goes to the river to be baptized. Jesus aligns himself with what John is doing.

But here’s the rub. Jesus is as unlike John as John was unlike all the other groups around him. John spoke in the language of the prophets, but Jesus speaks in a language that is entirely unique, with entirely different presuppositions. That difference is contained in the words that he hears at the time of his baptism: “this is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.” What did those words mean to Jesus, and why do they set him on a different course than his contemporaries? Even more to the point, what do those words have to do with you and me, some twenty centuries later?

As a carpenter’s son, Jesus came from the middle class, and so he might have placed himself among others of his peers, like the Pharisees. But in the moment of baptism, Jesus seems to have discovered an essential truth that formed the core of his teaching: the affirmation that God wasn’t mad at the world, but that God loved the world, and that for all its faults, it was a world worthy of care. In other words, it’s the rediscovery not of some original sin that stains human life and human societies, but rather of an original blessing, one that was true not only for him, but for everybody. That basic insight constitutes an alternative kind of politics, and it forces Jesus to contend with all of the other positions I’ve described. But more than that, it’s that fundamental intuition that sends him into the rural towns and villages, where, over and over again, he’s moved with tenderness and compassion for the people he encounters. Each of them has value. Each of them is a beloved child of the blessing. Each of them is worthy of concern, is worthy of grace, is worthy of love. Every interaction, every move that he made, flowed from that fundamental insight. Throughout his entire ministry, Jesus seemed to trust that there was a healing force of goodness at work in the world. That force connected people, rather than separating them. It was joyful and celebratory, even in the midst of a painful reality. It was the

inner assurance that whatever threatened the world with disintegration – an occupying army, say, or the decline of an entire way of life – there was a countervailing power strong enough to bind people together, strong enough to withstand the harshest treatment. Sometimes he called that healing goodness God. But as often as not he left it unnamed, preferring instead to speak about how that life force changed everything. (That’s why, by the way, as ministers and as people of faith, it’s sometimes better not to use the word “God,” and to rely on other ways of describing that life force. In that, we’re simply following the lead of Jesus himself.)

I’ve taken a lot of time to lay out the backdrop against which that moment in the Jordan River unfolds. In that moment of baptism, Jesus reclaimed the original blessing of the world in a time of catastrophe, and it changed everything. The parallels between his world and ours aren’t precise. But we too are living through what feels like a crisis, and I believe it’s worth returning to the origins of that moment in order to discover its power for ourselves. To do that, I think we need to return to our own baptisms.

Do you remember your baptism? I do. I was 11 at the time, and in sixth grade. We were a part of a church in Pennsylvania, and my grandfather was the pastor. On a Sunday night, a small group of boys and girls all put on bathrobes and took our turns being baptized in a heated tub at the front of the church. There are ways in which I can feel critical of the theology at play in that moment, but in truth, what I remember most of all was the morning after, and going to school with the sensation that something important had happened to me, something that I would have been at a loss to explain to my friends. I’m grateful for that moment, and grateful that it was my grandfather – who, more than anyone else, is probably the one most responsible for my vocational choice - who did the baptizing. The meaning of that Sunday evening in sixth grade wasn’t static – the meaning is still unfolding for me. But I believe that something of that life force, the same one that Jesus discovered, was at play in that moment. I believe that’s true for each of us.

I asked that same question about baptism to our Board of Trustees this past week, and I loved the responses I heard. Some people were baptized as infants, and so couldn’t recall the exact circumstances. A few had an experience similar to my own, in a tub at the front of a sanctuary. Others reported what it felt like to watch their children or grandchildren being baptized. But I think that in recalling those moments, all of us were brought before a powerful mystery, where something powerful and important had taken place, something that brought us up a little short, something that moved us, even despite our skepticism or doubt about what had occurred.

If I could sum up what I think is happening in the ritual of baptism, for Jesus, and for us, it would sound something like this: this world is a messy and chaotic place. There’s so much goodness in it, but there are other things at work that will try to diminish and distort that goodness. Moments of indescribable beauty will occur, but there will be moments that hurt and confuse you too. Sometimes you’ll be categorized and harshly judged. Sometimes you’ll be dismissed. Sometimes, people will use you for purposes that are less than worthy of who you are. But you are not to be defined by those distortions of your humanity. The first and best truth about your life is that in the ritual of baptism, you discover yourself as loved, as worthy of dignity, as a life that has value and meaning well beyond the external measures that have been placed upon you. And if that’s true of you, it’s true of everyone else as well. In baptism, you’re offered your own humanity as a precious gift, which has the effect of helping you to see the same things in other people, no matter how alike or unlike you they are. That’s something of what I sense in this ancient ritual called baptism.

Tomorrow, of course, is Martin Luther King Day, and I would be remiss if I didn't link these reflections to the meaning of Dr. King's life. He lived under enormous pressure, and he often had to fight off his own inner demons as he groped to find a way forward in the Civil Rights Movement. To do what he did, he needed a transcendent assurance of his personhood and being that could withstand the forces arrayed against him. One night, during one of the most discouraging periods of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King couldn't sleep, and he was troubled by his own self-doubts and by fear of what might happen to him. King later wrote that he sat at his kitchen table and prayed, and that in time he heard a voice, not unlike the one that spoke to Jesus: "Stand up for righteousness," the voice said. "Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you, even to the end of the world."<sup>2</sup>

That's the same voice that speaks in the moment of baptism. It found Jesus in the River Jordan, providing an affirmation of the worth and dignity of his own humanity, and thereby the humanity of all those he encountered. But I believe that voice is given to us as well. It was given in the moment of our own baptism, and its meaning continues to unfurl year by year. Here at the beginning of this new year, here in the midst of another pandemic winter, here in the middle of a tense historical moment in the life of this country and in the life of the world, we do well to hear that voice again. We do well to remember our baptisms, which set us upon an uncommon path, where goodness is more powerful than evil, where truth is stronger than falsehood, and where the worth and dignity of all God's children are affirmed.

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted in James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), pg. 78.