

Sermon on Mark 1:4-11  
The Baptism of Our Lord, Sunday, January 8, 2012  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

When we last read about John the Baptizer, it was before Christmas, when Mark described John as this strangely dressed character who lived in the wilderness beyond the Jordan River, “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” All the people of Jerusalem came out to hear him preach, and to be baptized – to confess their sins and to be cleansed by the water of the Jordan. Maybe they came out of curiosity (let’s face it – *curiosity* is a great motivator of people – it makes us watch strange television shows like *Fear Factor* and pay money to see circus side shows). Or maybe they came out of hope and faith – was John the “One” whom the prophets had written, the Messiah for whom they had been waiting to rescue them from Rome (and all their other troubles)? But John said no, he was NOT the one. He proclaimed, “*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. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*” That was on December 4<sup>th</sup> when we read this – a month ago.

Well, the Feast of Christmas intervened, and we were on to other things – the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, the good news proclaimed to shepherds in the hills overlooking the town, and the visit of these shepherds and wise men from the East to worship this newborn “king”. We’ve heard concerts and sung songs, attended parties and feasted on holiday foods to celebrate this birth – as a month-long interlude between these verses in Mark about the Baptist. But Mark doesn’t even mention the birth of Jesus! He immediately went to the important part of the story: the beginnings of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee. And Jesus takes the “hand-off” from John the Baptist, when he came from his hometown in Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan (like so many others).

So let’s get right to it. Mark says that “*just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*” Now, it seems that ONLY JESUS saw the heavens torn apart and this dove descending, and we don’t know if anyone other than Jesus heard the voice of God give his blessing. It’s hard to tell from the text. But maybe it doesn’t matter. Is it critical whether John or the crowds heard this also? Would making this a “public event” make it more true? Either way, Jesus saw the Spirit of God descending upon him – like a dove – and he heard God bless him with the words “*You are my Beloved Son.*” These are the words that Peter, James and John later heard on the mountain where Jesus was “transfigured” before them, another sign

from God that this Jesus had God's power and authority as the "Messiah" to do great things. And what gave Jesus this power? It came from the Holy Spirit.

This transformed the baptism of John the Baptist, who baptized for repentance and the forgiveness of sins, by also making baptism a time of *empowerment* with the power of the Holy Spirit. So this is the key message of the day: not only is this the day that we remember (and celebrate) the Baptism of Jesus as the Son of God, the one in whom God infused with the power of the Holy Spirit. On this day we also connect our own baptism to that of Jesus. For when you and I were baptized, we were given the promise of forgiveness of sins, the promise of eternal life, and you and I were named as children of God. But not only that, in baptism, *we, too, received the gift of the Holy Spirit – which is the gift of God's power to do great and creative things in this world and in our lives!*

It took awhile even for the Church to figure this out! In our second lesson from the Book of Acts, we read that when Paul was traveling around in Greece starting up churches, he found people who had been baptized by Apollos, and *had never heard of the Holy Spirit!* They had been baptized with "John's" baptism, for repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Then Paul baptized them in the name of Jesus, and laid hands on them, so that they received the power of the Holy Spirit.

We are very used to looking upon baptism as an act of blessing in the Church, a time in which we bless our children when they are born, as well as older youth or adults who come to faith and wish to become part of Christ's body, the Church. We are accustomed to hearing the promise that in baptism we are made children of God *through faith*, receive forgiveness for our sins, and the promise of eternal life. But do you hear that in your baptism, God says "*You are my Beloved daughter, you are my beloved son – and with you I am pleased?*" In a day when so many people do not feel "loved" by anyone, this is a powerful statement! And do you hear that in your baptism and through faith *you have the power of God through the Holy Spirit?* Probably not – because most of us go through life thinking and acting as if we had no power at all – especially the power of God! Isn't that just for performing miracles, healing the sick or moving mountains? Isn't God's power reserved only for God, or for Jesus? Maybe the apostles had that power, but that was a long time ago, when people did and believed such things! "Can't you just wait for Pentecost, to talk about the Holy Spirit and power, Pastor?"

Well, I can't wait for Pentecost to say this – because that's not until May 27, and "*this is the day which the Lord has made*" – and we believe in the Church that God gives us all the gift of the Holy Spirit and its power *when we are baptized!* And what is "power"? Simply translated, it is the "ability to act." Power is the ability to do something, to stand up and walk, to move, to build, and to create. We act with power every day just in the act of getting out of bed in the morning, *but God calls and empowers you and me to do so much more, through faith, and with*

*the Holy Spirit!* As people of God, you and I have the power to do great things – especially when we do them together with other people of faith, through the Church – in the name of Jesus! And when we do these powerful things, consistent with the values of faith (with love, with compassion, for the sake of Christ’s love for others), then we are a powerful witness to the love of God in Christ Jesus!

The power of the Spirit is not just about speaking in tongues or prophesying (though it may include that). And we don’t have to heal the sick, move mountains or raise the dead to be doing powerful things! They can also be quite ordinary: to visit the sick, welcome the stranger, say a word of forgiveness, or to speak up with the truth when to be silent would be much more convenient or expected – these all require some power – the “ability to act”. We often hear in the Church that “power is bad”, power is “self-seeking”, power corrupts, or makes bad people do bad things. But the truth is that power is neutral, not good or evil, and when we use our God-given ability to act then our power can do very good things! Like feed the hungry, clothe the naked, free the prisoner, welcome strangers, and make peace with our enemies! Power gives you the ability to walk with your neighbor in life, to reach out in friendship, to say you are sorry and “I forgive you.” When WE ALL do this, and add it all up cumulatively, or do such things like working for justice together, this is even greater power, an even greater witness of the Church, in the name of Jesus, who has forgiven us, who reaches out to others, shows us how to welcome strangers and eat with “outcasts and sinners”!

All this happens because of the power of the Holy Spirit, given to each one of us, in baptism. You have this gift, whether you are aware of it or not! All you have to do is call upon it, and it is yours. (Maybe that literal “mountain” won’t move, but those great obstacles in your life just might, through faith!) Who knows? What’s certain is that if you never ask, you will never receive! If you and I never act, nothing will ever get done! That goes for individuals, and for the Church!

But all these things come from the gift of God in “knowing who you are, and whose you are.” When you were born, you were born a child of God – as all children are. When you are baptized, you receive your identity as God’s child *in the name of God the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit*. So today’s lesson is another reminder to you and me (and all children of God everywhere) that *you are loved, you are God’s beloved daughter or son, and because of this love, God promises you an abundant life, through faith*. God sent Jesus to be the model for this life, to teach us how to live, how to share, how to pray, how to live in relationship with God and our neighbor, how to reach out to others with forgiveness and welcome, and how to act powerfully with love, in Jesus’s name. So let’s go out into the world today with the certain hope that comes from knowing who we are: children of God, beloved daughters and sons, with the power and the call from God to live and act in this world as witnesses to the life and love that we have received! Amen.