

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, September 12, 2021

Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he 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."

So, on a quiet street near Stamford University stands a 12 by 18 garage on the national registry of historic places. The story goes that in this humble workplace college buddies Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard first pursued their dream of developing a company of their own.

An HP publication notes that, guided by an unwavering desire to develop innovative and useful products, the two men went on to blaze a trail at the forefront of the electronics revolution. Today the garage where they began their work stands as an enduring symbol of innovation and the entrepreneurial spirit. The garage it turns out is an icon of Silicon Valley, from HP to Apple to Google, garages have a sort of lure a mythological power all their own. When the stories of the tech revolution are told, they are gritty. It is the ingenuity of hard scrabble inventors who are bent on creating something brand new that is lauded in these stories. Inconvenient details, of course, are left out of these stories as Mike Cosper of Christianity Today points out. When Google set up shop in a garage in Menlo Park, the company was already two years old, and it had millions of dollars in startup funds to play with. Steve Wozniak, co-founder of Apple, has called their founding story in a garage mostly untrue, noting that all of the design and the building of the first Apple computer happens somewhere else. Even the HP garage needs an asterisk because, while Hewlett Packard did build their first device in that garage, the design and the prototyping all happened in nearby labs, including one at Stanford.

The founder's myth develops and persists because it resonates with us. Garages become lauded in Silicon Valley because there is something about what it looks like to see a couple people go into garage with nothing but an idea and some time on their hands and come out with this wonderful powerful device that will lead to a powerful company.

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We love scrappy gritty heroes who, through hard work and bold persistence, will their ideas into existence. Understanding the founder's myth, though, is important, because it shapes how we view the beginning of Jesus's public ministry. Jesus could have begun his public ministry however he wished. He could have set himself up as a scrappy hero bent on establishing the Kingdom of God through his own will and work, but that is not what Jesus does.

Scripture tells us that Jesus makes his way from Nazareth in Galilee to the Jordan River, and there he is baptized by John. Jesus begins his story, and the author of the gospel of Mark tells us clearly, with a long dusty walk from his home to the Jordan River. He begins in baptism, that is to say, he begins by yielding to the ministry of another, in this case, John. He begins with the symbolism of the water, dissent, and death, and then rising, and new life, and in so doing Jesus evaporates the myth the myth that could be written about him and the ministry that is going to follow myths that could be written about. The healings that people will witness, the miracles that they will see, the multiplication of fish, and bread. The healing of people.

Jesus reveals important and eternal truths when he decides that for him baptism is the beginning of the journey. First, he teaches that his life and his ministry are not born of his own power, but of the very power of God. Jesus, as he goes down into the water, as he descends into the waters of the Jordan, he dies to the myth of self-sufficiency, and rises to the provision of the divine. For those who witness the sky torn apart and the spirit descending like a dove, there will be no confusion about what is to follow. The very power of God has been inaugurated and will sustain the ministry of this one that we call Jesus.

The second thing that happens while Jesus begins his story, is that his own baptism reveals a universal pattern of existence - of living and dying and rising. If you were here for Easter, maybe you remember that three phrase universal pattern. It turns out that even as he begins his ministry, and even as it looks like he's just coming up to his cousin, who's a weird guy - camel hair and eating locust and honey, right? Even as he yields and is placed into the water and then rises back up, what is happening in that time is Jesus is revealing a bigger pattern. It is a pattern at work in every dimension of our world and our lives. Living, and then dying, and then rising. It's a pattern that inaugurates Jesus's ministry. It's a pattern that we will read about at the end of the gospel of Mark as well. Living and dying and rising. This is the eternal pattern of the divine in the world.

Symbolically, the baptismal font still for us makes this claim that, as people of faith, is the pattern imprinted on all creation. Living dying and rising. We see this pattern in Jesus' ministry and by the cross and by the empty tomb. We will see this pattern in every bit of all creation. You will see it in your lives and in your relationships. You will see it in your work. You will see it in your faith, even living and dying and rising.

Jesus exposes the myth because here's the thing. There's a great temptation to ignore this pattern. There is a great temptation to ignore the truth. So much of our life here is designed to thwart death, to ignore its reality, and therefore to skip resurrection. But Jesus places it up front in his ministry, and so do we in this worship space by where we place our baptismal font. This

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beautiful stone and metal that houses a humble bowl and, on a few Sundays a month, gets to hear perhaps a very peaceful baby, or perhaps a baby that is disturbed from slumber by a mean pastor.

This place that gets to see new life that has just come into the world, that through this simple symbol of water, claims that something can happen. It claims that, for us and within us, within our lives, within our work, we are grounded solely. We begin our story solely not by our own power, but by the power of God. It's hard for us to remember that, because so much of our lives is about self-preservation. Yet, Jesus begins his ministry by dying to his own self-sufficiency and rising to the very power of God.

There are implications for this. There are implications for why the baptismal font is here and placed where it is in this sanctuary. You know our church has had a couple other locations before we ended up here at 1750 Union, but in each of those places there has been a font not too dissimilar to this one. It's been a place where babies have come forward, where folks, even more mature, have come to a new life in Jesus Christ. I wonder if we forget that sometimes. I wonder if we forget the power that we witness when we gather around the font together.

Shane Claiborne rightly observes that it is dangerous for the church to forget the power of the baptismal font, and what it carries with us he says. Perhaps there is no more dangerous place for a Christian to be than in safety and comfort, detached from the suffering and death of the world.

It is easy for us to be detached in this place, even from the suffering and death of the world. If we are detached from that suffering and death, then we must and we cannot fully comprehend the power of God at work in resurrection in new life. Living, dying, and then the power of God in rising. There is a cost. There is a cost to this way of moving through the world. Lest we forget from whence our faith has come, it comes from a young rabbi takes a dusty walk to the bank of a river, meets a crazy looking guy, goes down into the water, and let's everyone know that everything that's about to happen. Everything that I will take on, Jesus says, I'm going to do this by the very power of God at work within me. And there is a cost. This is the preamble, of course, that ties to the end of the story. And we know what the cost is, and we know what that looks like. But there is also a cost when we decide that we are bold enough to come before these waters or as we are asked to do every time we celebrate a baptism, we remember our own baptisms. There is a cost to that discipleship. There is a dying that must happen so a rising can happen. Living, and dying, and rising. Sometimes there are small deaths that we have to take in our personal lives, and sometimes there are bigger things that must go down into the water so they can be raised to new life.

Will Williman, the former dean of the chapel at Duke University, got a call one afternoon from a very upset parent. The voice on the other end of the line said "I hold you personally responsible for this." That was how the call opened. Williman told me about the father on the other end of the line was hot upset because his graduate school-bound daughter had just informed him that she was going to throw it all away, according to him, and go and do mission work with Presbyterians in Haiti. The father, through the phone, said she's got a BS degree in

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mechanical engineering from Duke and she's going to go dig ditches in Haiti. Williman took a breath.

Well, I doubt that she's received much training in the engineering department here for that kind of work, but she's probably a fast learner, and will probably get the hang of digging ditches in a few months, I'm sure. This is not laughing matter the father said. You're completely irresponsible. You've encouraged her to do this. I know you have. She told me that you had. I hold you personally responsible for this. As the conversation went on, Dr Williman pointed out to the well-meaning but obviously unprepared parents, that they were the ones who started this ball rolling. They were the ones that brought their daughter to the baptismal font. They were the ones that made promises to read scripture to her and pray with her. They were the ones that took her to Sunday school. They were the ones that let her go to Presbyterian youth fellowship, to ski trips and youth group activities . You're the ones, he said, who introduced her to Jesus, not me.

There was silence on the other end of the line, and then the father said, but all we wanted her to be a Presbyterian.

That's not what happens here.

What happens here is we claim together that the universal pattern of life is living and dying and rising. We claim together that the power that is at work within each of us and also in our church is not our own. Like Jesus, we lay aside this myth that we can persist in this world on our own ingenuity and intelligence and energy,

We lay aside the myth that we can will the world to be different than it is, and we claim the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that at work in the world is a power beyond any power that we can have. At work even within us by the very power of the holy spirit is the divine power of god

We exposed, once and for all in these waters in a humble bowl and normal water that we pulled from the tap just an hour ago, that through this font new life can be born. We trust it, believe it to be true, and then we live as people who know the power of God at work in their lives in the world. This font must continue to be a forever piece of this place because, within its waters, within its stone, and its metal, the mystery of God lives. And each time we run our hand through it, which I invite you to do this day as you leave worship. each time we run our hands through that water, each time we remember our own baptisms, we claim that that power is still at work and shall be for all eternity.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One God. Mother of us all.
Amen.