

Advent 2 - Mark 1:1-8
“Worth a Day’s Wages”
December 10, 2017
Rev. Dr. Anne Miner-Pearson

Mark writes, “And the people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to John, and were baptized by him...”. Unlike the later gospel writers, Mark doesn’t tell us who’s in the crowd. It takes Matthew and Luke to add details, but it’s safe to assume that the crowd is serious about God. Except for soldiers, tax collectors and religious and government leaders, no one in Israel in those days was on salary. No work, no pay. If you aren’t baking the bread, sanding a table leg, weaving cloth or tending the crops, no new coins clink in your purse that night. It is an expensive decision to come to Jordan to hear John. Mere curiosity is too costly. You have to be a committed religious person.

John’s call to repent and be baptized with water is familiar to the Hebrew crowd. However odd his appearance and diet, they know about cleansing rituals. In Jerusalem for a high holy day, they pass, if not use, at least one of many Temple pools. Yet, I suspect John’s news puzzles them - someone more powerful is coming and “he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” What is John saying? Why would they need more than the ritual they already know? The priests in the Temple recommend it and they have never hinted that there’s more needed, something to do with the Holy Spirit.

Oh, it’s not that the Hebrews don’t know about the Holy Spirit. They know the story of God’s Spirit as breath moving over the emptiness and void to bring forth creation. They also know the story of God’s Spirit blowing over the flood waters to return dry land in Noah’s story. Then, of course, there is the Exodus story. Every year these people hear again how Moses lifts his staff and God parts the waters of the Red Sea. The crowd knows about God’s Spirit changing the void, the flood and oppression into new life. In each of those stories, God brings about deep, transforming change - from the emptiness to life, from devastation to promise, from slavery to freedom.

But, I wonder if John’s news is more than they expected when they intentionally gave up a day of wages. I wonder if they are ready for deeper transformation work of God’s Spirit within. This seems like more than a familiar ritual. John even warns it’s more powerful. It’s not just a story of God’s Spirit acting in the past, in someone else’s life. Clearly, it’s not about being one of thousands gathered in the Temple and going through the motions. John says the one coming “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

At this point, it’s fair and true to say, no one in that crowd could have known exactly what John was saying, including John, I believe. Yet, if we stand in Mark’s message of Advent, to pause, to notice, to allow the moment on the bank of the Jordan to soak in, John is saying a lot. His words are worth more than a day’s wages. His words speak of what happens when we are serious about God. John says that our spiritual journey is more than about outward rituals. Yes, our experience with God contains holy outer actions and mental knowing. Yet, there is more.

God wants to transform us. For that, God became human in Jesus. How powerful is that? How serious is that? God’s Spirit moves over cosmic emptiness creating life. God’s Spirit sweep over floods creating a second chance and promise. God opens paths in barriers to freedom and a future. Yet, more powerfully

and fully John reminds us in Advent, God's Spirit also wants to dwell in us, in our emptiness, in our second tries, in our reaching beyond what keeps us from freedom and hope. God wants to baptize us with the Holy Spirit and fuller life, beyond rituals and water.

Now, at this point in the story and the sermon, it is tempting to turn toward all the ways Jesus invites us into these fuller and deeper waters. And believe me, I have many things to share with you on that. But, let's wait, stay in Advent. Let's not so easily leap over this moment in Mark's gospel, in this moment in our lives. Like the crowd, we have left today's tasks for a time, looking for God, serious about God. And like they must have done, we can wonder what baptism with the Holy Spirit might look, feel and be like. How might our lives be touched, blessed and transformed by the Holy Spirit, our lives beyond the rituals, beneath the surface, behind the usual? What does Jesus come to give?

I want to share a few answers from my own life. Few of you know that the "Tori" on the prayer list is my granddaughter. She recently spent a week at Children's Hospital with severe belly pain. She's okay now, but my daughter, Sarah, and I ate several meals of Daniel's delicious leftovers in the hospital family dining room. Once we shared the space with a woman from Somalia. Her younger son, who has cerebral palsy, was a patient. But, I heard John's words as she told her story. She is learning how to stand up for herself and her sons because her Muslim community is shunning them out of fear and ignorance of the disease. She needs more than outward rituals of being a mother. She needs to draw on God's Holy Spirit within herself.

Wondering what Jesus comes to bring reminds me of another recent moment. I was listening to "Performance Today" on MPR. That day was featuring performances from Gateway, a gathering of classical musicians of African-descent. One of them exclaimed that she had never been with so many people who looked like her and loved what she loved. After that intro, I was shocked that I kept imagining the musicians as white, their fingers and bodies looking like me. Now, I have been through the ritual of many racism workshops. This was not the first time I saw behind the curtain of racism, but that day, I saw more behind my hidden racial bias. The Holy Spirit pulled the curtain further back through music.

For my last story, I can't stay in Advent. I have to leap into Christmas and beyond and speak of the ritual we share in the Eucharist. Both as lay person and priest, a particularly holy moment is when the blessed bread and wine are held up and offered to all: "The Gifts of God for the People of God". To me, those words are powerful and true. The offering of that bread and wine, God as we experience in Jesus, truly is a gift and signs us as God's children. Yet, on Devon's first Sunday back from sabbatical, those ritual words were not in the bulletin. Instead I said: "Behold, what you are" and you replied "May we become what we receive."

Maybe like you, I was a little thrown off. Where were the familiar words easily flowing from my mouth and settling comfortably in the usual place in my soul? I had come to the banks of the Jordan, leaving my daily life for a time, and expected to experience God's presence in the usual way. I was surprised. Now, with John's words in my head, I wonder if those new words might more deeply and fully unwrap God's gift so God might come to dwell, not just in Jesus, but in us? Could John's voice in Advent be telling us that the Holy Spirit can never be contained in a ritual, but will break out and break us open? Could we behold what we are and become what we receive?

That would be worth more than a day's wages. AMEN