

Jesus Unalloyed
Acts 19:1-7 and Mark 1:4-11
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Jesus was not baptized. I know it says so right there in Mark chapter one, verse 9 that he was, but I'm here to tell you that he was not baptized. Oh, he may have been dunked by John in the river Jordan. He may even have been completely submerged. But he wasn't baptized. At least not in the way that both the Apostle Paul and the Christian church understand baptism.

You may, like many over the years, have been confused by this episode which is recorded in three of the four Gospels, in which it does indeed say, "And Jesus was baptized." You may have been confused because you wondered how it was possible that someone without sin participated in a rite designed specifically for sinners. After all, it even says right there in both of our passages tonight that John's baptism was "the baptism of repentance" and what can *that* mean if it doesn't mean that sinners were coming to the river. Righteous, sinless people don't need to repent, just people who have done something wrong, who have violated the covenant, who have fallen short of the glory of God. But Scripture is pretty clear that Jesus doesn't really fall into any of those categories and so we are left wondering just what is going on in these stories of Jesus meeting John on the banks of that mighty river and letting his beard get wet.

Well, tonight I want to unpack these two stories a little and see where they lead us, but I will give you a preview that they will lead us to the Communion Table. You see tonight, as we come forward to partake of Jesus' body and blood, we will be, in a sense similar to Jesus in the Jordan, coming forward for that other kind of baptism. We won't be getting wet, but if we listen carefully, we just might hear the Spirit speaking the same words to us that Jesus heard: "You are my Son, you are my daughter, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." For that is precisely why Jesus ventured to the Jordan, and why we make our way to the table: to hear those words of grace, and to let them soak into our very bones, and to come away from the experience ready to face the world's challenges anew.

So why do I say Jesus wasn't baptized? Well, I say it mainly because of what has taken place since Jesus' own experience in the river, and because of what is described in our passage from Acts tonight in which Paul encounters some believers who not only had not received the Holy Spirit when they became believers, but had not even heard of the Holy Spirit before Paul asks them the question. They had been baptized, but it had been a baptism of the same variety as Jesus, what they called "John's baptism," a baptism that Paul very clearly distinguishes from "baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus." John's baptism for the repentance of sins and baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus, two very different acts meaning two different things, even if there is some overlap. What do I mean by differentiating the two? Well, in "John's baptism" you could say that those who

came for it did the work themselves. They may have had some help entering and exiting the water, but what happened while they were in there was simply that they got wet. Oh, they may have felt different when they came out, refreshed in some way, with a new resolve to go forward and sin no more, but in John's baptism, with the exception of the occasion of Jesus' participation in it, there isn't really any divine activity going on. God doesn't seem to do anything. Don't get me wrong, God is *always* up to something, but in this ritual, in John's baptism, probably the most you can say about God's activity is that it's a kind of lurking presence, a sort of an implicit, or even explicit challenge to be more righteous, to hold oneself to a higher standard, and a higher accountability. We don't hear accounts of the thousands who were baptized by John experiencing the Holy Spirit, or a radically transformed life, like the twelve we heard about baptized by Paul in the name of Jesus. But that's OK, because that wasn't really the purpose of John's baptism, for them, or for Jesus. What does John say about his baptism? "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.' " What does Paul say about it? "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." And so in John's baptism, we don't see anything remarkable happen because those who went under went under under their own power, and not the power of God.

By contrast, what those twelve experienced in the story in Acts, and what the church has understood about the nature of baptism since then, is that there is significantly more divine activity in baptism in the name of Jesus, or as we do it now, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There is more at stake than simple repentance in Christian baptism. When you come out of the water after a Christian baptism, you have died and risen with Christ. When you come out of the water after a Christian baptism, you have become a child in the kingdom of God. When you come out of the water after a Christian baptism, you have received the Holy Spirit, even if it is not always evident in so dramatic a fashion as in our story tonight. Yes, in Christian baptism, God does something to us. We are changed not merely in our resolve to be better people through repentance by our own good deeds, but also because in Christian baptism we know that we are claimed by God, and loved by God precisely not because of our resolve, but because of Christ's resolve, and the reconciliation with God that brings. Christian baptism has always been understood as a rite of initiation into the beloved community, a sign and seal of God's grace, and not merely as a sign of our own repentance. This is what those twelve disciples in Ephesus learned when they were baptized by Paul in the name of Jesus.

And so, just what was Jesus doing there by the Jordan with John? Well, I like to think of it as something like the process of confirmation some traditions practice with their young people, or perhaps as a type of rededication, maybe like

the renewal of wedding vows. Last week, we heard the story from Luke of Mary and Joseph bringing Jesus to the temple when he was eight days old to be dedicated there, as was the custom and according to the law. Years pass, the child increases “in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor,” and the moment arrives for him to begin to do what he has come to do: to announce the kingdom of God. It will be a long road, a hard journey, and like any wise person preparing for such a task, Jesus too wants to put his ducks in a row, to get started off on the right foot, and what better way to do that than to reaffirm what had taken place in the temple so many years ago. Remember now that John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. So what exactly then is Jesus doing there? Well, it might help us to remember what repentance is all about, especially the traditional Hebrew word Jesus would have known, *shuv*, to turn around, to literally turn around, to turn from sin and to turn to God, in a sense to show God that you are once again on God’s side after you’ve strayed. And so what I think we see here in the so-called baptism of Jesus is Jesus declaring, to himself at least, and maybe to the world, that he was truly on God’s side. He was reaffirming, confirming that he was already facing in God’s direction, that he was aligned with God, that although he had been dedicated to God by his parents in the Temple, he himself as an adult was dedicated to God, ready to do God’s mischief in the world.

And as if that weren’t enough, I think there is something even deeper at work here, a purpose to Jesus’ act that we too might draw from even today. I think

Jesus went there to the River Jordan, that famous site of God's choice of his ancestors, to tap into that great well of divine faithfulness and tradition that he would need for his mission. He went there, I think, he went under, I think, to reach out for the touchstone of his people's history, to connect with its power, its authenticity, its truth, and to show to himself and the world that he was as pure as that truth, that he was made of the same stuff, and thus, worthy of the being the bearer in his own body of good news.

Do you know what a touchstone is? I always had the idea it was a rock in the center of town, part of a monument that you went to touch for good luck, or to remember where you came from. And maybe such places do exist, but a touchstone, I learned, has a very specific purpose, a very important purpose. A touchstone was actually a form of rock used to evaluate the quality of precious metals, like gold or silver. The way it conducted the metal would tell you if the metal were real, or of what quality it was. It was a way of evaluating truth and fiction. You see, back before everyone in the world was honest, there used to be counterfeiters, people who would unscrupulously mix precious metals like gold with not-so-precious base metals and pass off the coins as the real thing. And so, as people generally don't like being ripped off, someone came up with a method to remedy the situation. The practice of using a touchstone appears to have arisen in Greece around 500 BC, and it radically changed the Greek economic system, because it created a real value for coined money by allowing people to actually test

it for purity. The way it worked was this: you would take a piece of the metal being tested and rub it against the touchstone, a real piece of stone like basalt or jasper, and once a streak to be tested had been laid down, a kind of “testing pencil” of a known alloy was used to apply a second streak for comparison. And depending on whether they looked the same or different, you knew if it was the real stuff. You had to get them up close, side by side, to make sure it was the real thing. That’s the purpose of a touchstone, to reveal the truth. You can see then why the term “touchstone” began to acquire wider implications, which is why you may hear people referring to a means of judgment or measurement as a “touchstone.” ”

What was Jesus’ touchstone? Jesus’ touchstone was the law, and the prophetic tradition which defended it, a tradition of which John the Baptist is both fully and finally representative, fully in that both his manner, the camel’s hair, the wild locust and honey, and all of that, and his message, the message of repentance, both of these harken back to the great Old Testament prophets, and finally, because he will be the last of that kind of prophet. Jesus will become the new touchstone, the new way to assess truth, but for the moment, in Jesus’ moment, the truth of the Old Testament call to righteousness is what Jesus references when he meets John in the Jordan. He is, so to speak, rubbing himself up against the very stone tablets Moses brought down from Mount Sinai to show he belongs, that he is authentic, that he is the “real deal,” the “right stuff.” There is no alloy in Jesus. He is the pure thing, the same stuff of the tablets, the same stuff of the law. Those tablets are long

gone, lost in the sands of time, perhaps buried in the Well of Souls in the City of Tanis, covered by a sand storm that lasted a whole year, if you believe Indiana Jones about these kinds of things. And so the next best thing to the tablets were those whom God called to protect and defend not the tablets themselves, but what was inscribed on them by the finger of God, and those people were the prophets, the Isaiahs and Jeremiahs and Ezeikiels and Johns of their times. And so there he is in the River Jordan, going down, and coming up again, and hearing the results of the test: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” He wasn’t changed by the experience, far from it; he was the same as ever. But in it, he showed that he was just where and who he was supposed to be.

Although we probably need another word for John’s “baptism,” it would be a mistake to get rid of the concept altogether. We all need, from time to time, that opportunity to turn again toward God, to see how we are measuring up to the divine standards of love, compassion, and righteousness, to remember what we learned in our Christian baptisms that through adoption in Jesus Christ we are beloved sons and daughters, with whom God is well pleased. Jesus is our touchstone now, and we are called to reach out and touch him. You may remember way back at the beginning of my comments tonight that I said we would be like Jesus coming to the Jordan as we come forward to partake of Jesus’ body and blood. You see, as we approach the table, we will be lining up our own bodies and our own blood up next to the body and blood of Jesus Christ, and what we’ll see,

or what I hope we'll see, is that it is the same stuff. Flesh and blood people called to go out and minister to flesh and blood people because we have been called for that purpose. The Lord's Supper is, in a way, like baptism was for Jesus, an opportunity for us to revisit our roots, to measure ourselves on the touchstone of our faith, to reaffirm our presence in the kingdom. The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper doesn't change us, per se, so much as it reminds us of our status as changed people, an affirmation of the very same thing which Jesus heard. We won't be getting wet, but if we listen carefully, we just might hear the Spirit speaking the same words to us that Jesus heard: "You are my son, you are my daughter, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." For that is precisely why Jesus ventured to the Jordan, and why we make our way to the table: to hear those words of grace, and to let them soak into our very bones, and to come away from the experience ready to face the world's challenges anew. Amen.