

Our Baptism and the Baptism of Jesus

Mark 1:4-11

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

January 24, 2021

In 1876 the Benedictine order bought a 600 acre farm near Charlotte, North Carolina. Long before Europeans moved into the area the land had belonged to the Catawba tribe, which, legend had it, performed religious rituals on a large block of stone. Later, that stone became an auction block on which slaves were bought and sold. Locally, it was called the Slave Stone.

Perhaps it was because of those prior associations that the Benedictines buried the stone, forgot about it and went about building Belmont Abbey, which today consists of a monastery, a college and the Basilica of Mary, Help of Christians.

In 1964, when a renovation of the facilities was underway, the abbot instructed a monk and a student who was working on campus that summer to find the stone and dig it up.

“Do you have any idea where it is buried?” they wanted to know.

“We think it is somewhere beneath the asphalt parking lot,” the abbot said.

The monk and the student marked off a 100 square foot area and gamely started chipping away. A few days later their picks and shovels struck granite.

Fifty years later, the student – now retired -- said that on finding the stone he took off his shoes and stood on the rock where men and women had been bought and sold.

Today when you enter the Basilica of Mary, Help of Christians, the stone is the first thing you see. It has been sandblasted smooth and polished. And a basin has been carved out of the upper surface. The Slave Stone is now a baptismal font.

A plaque reads: “Upon this rock men (and women) once were sold into slavery. Now upon this rock, through the waters of baptism, men (and women) become free children of God.”

You can almost hear the singing of the spiritual,

*Oh freedom, oh freedom, oh freedom over me
And before I'll be a slave
I'll be buried in my grave
And go home to my lord and be free.*

The late theologian James Cone, author of the pivotal book Black Theology, wrote, “Black people’s singing, praying, and preaching are not grounded in any human potentiality but in the actuality of God’s freedom to be with the oppressed as disclosed in the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is their freedom.” (God of the Oppressed, 129)

Whatever you say about Jesus, you must say that he was free and that he set others free. He was both liberated and liberator. And though it may not be obvious, I believe his freedom can be traced in part to his baptism by John the Baptizer. Let me explain.

*Wild the man and wild the place
wild his dress and wild his face
wilder still his words that trace
paths that lead from sin to grace.*

That is the way the poet/hymnwriter Thomas Troeger describes the strange figure who emerged from the wilderness of Judea calling on all who would listen to repent of their sins and be baptized in the Jordan River.

According to Mark's Gospel "*people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him.*" They packed their lunches and trekked down to the Jordan to hear this wild man. When he blasted them for their sins, they nodded in guilt-ridden agreement. When he demanded that they repent, they filed into the river, where he immersed them in the water of the Jordan – a baptism for the forgiveness of their sins.

Then one day John looked up and saw next in line – Jesus of Nazareth. Other versions of the story – those found in Matthew and Luke – say that John objected, saying that Jesus should baptize him, implying that John recognized that Jesus was the Promised One from God. Let's stick with Mark's version, which is skeletal: John called people to repent and be baptized; Jesus walked the aisle and John baptized him.

The question that has intrigued and puzzled Christians for 2,000 years is, Why was Jesus baptized? As tantalizing as that question is, I think we should ask a different question: What did his baptism mean to Jesus?

We depend on biblical scholars to help us understand the Bible, especially with their knowledge of biblical languages. But sometimes the meaning is right in front of us on the printed page in English.

Mark says that when Jesus came out of the water of the Jordan, "*he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.*" "He" not "they." I think we often assume that if we had been there, we would have seen the heavens open and the Spirit descend, and we would have heard the very voice of God. But that isn't what the text says. Matthew is even more explicit: "*The heavens opened to him. And he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.*" And by extension, *he heard* the voice of God say, "*You are my child, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.*"

Onlookers did not go home and report, "Marge, you're not going to believe what happened today. I saw the heavens open up, and I saw the Spirit of God come flying down like a bird and lighting on this guy from Nazareth, and I heard God say this is the guy!" They didn't say that because they didn't see that or hear that.

This is not language that describes a physical event that everyone who happened to there that day could see and hear. This is the language of a profound spiritual experience. Luke says all of this happened while Jesus was praying. (3:21)

The question is, What was the impact of that powerful experience on Jesus? What was it like to hear God say, "*You are my child, the beloved; with you I am well pleased*"? What was the impact on one who was on the verge of beginning his public ministry?

Incredibly empowering, I would think. And freeing.

Indeed, what is the next thing the empowered and freed Jesus did, the very next thing? He walked into the wilderness and went head-to-head with Satan.

Then he walked out of the wilderness and embarked on a ministry of liberation.

He liberated people from disease of mind and spirit as well as body. Like the Gadarene demoniac who was filled with such self-loathing that he tortured himself, cutting his body, and who so despised his life that he lived in a cemetery. You don't have to be a Freudian to figure that out. Freed by Jesus he went his way "*clothed and in his right mind.*"

He liberated people from an uneven and unfair enforcement of law. (Sound familiar?) Like the woman who had been "*taken in the act of adultery,*" which was a capital offense for both parties. But Jesus couldn't help but notice that her accusers brought her but not her partner. Even in olden times, it took two. He defended her and saved her life -- while acknowledging her guilt. He sent her on her way saying, "*Go your way and sin no more.*" (John 8:11)

He liberated people from narrow tribalism (see the Good Samaritan). And from rigid religion that restricted the free movement of the Spirit -- "*The Sabbath was made for people; people weren't made for the Sabbath*" (Mark 2:27) -- while holding steadfastly to the core of authentic faith -- love of God and love of neighbor.

The earliest Christians understood and preached Jesus as a liberator. "*If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.*" (John 8:32)

Jesus could liberate others because he was free; his freedom grounded in his deep conviction that he had been singled out by God, ordained by God, empowered by God.

As a free person under God, he could not be controlled, coerced or intimidated, not by the leaders of his own religion, not even by Rome.

Soon we will be reminded of the last words Jesus spoke from the cross. One wonders about the last words he heard; were they the words he heard as he emerged from the Jordan -- "*You are my child, the beloved; with you I am well pleased*" -- words that empowered and set him free?

Patrick, the fifth century missionary to Ireland, wrote:

*I bind this day to me forever
By the power of faith
Christ's incarnation
His baptism in Jordan River
His death on the cross for my salvation*

To bind ourselves to Jesus through baptism is to bind ourselves to his liberated and liberating spirit.

"*Can you be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?*" (Matthew 20:23 in some ancient texts) That was the question Jesus asked his disciples shortly before they entered Jerusalem for the final time. That is the question for each of us on this observance of the Baptism of our Lord. On this day and every day, may our answer be, "In your freedom and through your power, we are able." Amen.