



January 5-6, 2019
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Baptism Weekend: New Beginnings

Mark 1:1-8

2018 was a great year at Chapel Hill! The story you just heard from Morgan has been repeated numerous times in the lives of many people over the last 12 months. Last year, over 300+ people attended Alpha, exploring the big questions about life and faith. Last year, 67 people made decisions to follow Jesus; 67 lives changed for eternity because of what God is doing in your church! Those are numbers worth celebrating.

Here's one more. We are in the midst of initiative to eliminate all remaining debt so that we can be freed up to move "beyond these walls" as never before. When we started 18 months ago, we had debt of about \$ 5.5 million dollars. As of today, through your generosity, we have paid off... \$ 3,092,699! Amazing! 2018 was a great year in so many ways...and we are excited to see what God intends to do in 2019.

So to kick off a New Year, we celebrate new beginnings. And the ultimate Christian symbol of new beginnings is what? Baptism! Water represents the washing away of our sins; a fresh start. Typically, we Presbyterians are sprinklers; the denominational equivalent of dry cleaners. But today...we are a laundromat. Lots of water. But it's not the water that cleans; it is the Holy Spirit. Whether you sprinkle or dunk...the water is a symbol of the thorough cleaning that only the Holy Spirit can do.

We baptize because Jesus told us to. It was his parting shot in Matthew...what we call the Great Commission...to go into all the world and baptize people into his family. We ALSO baptize because Jesus set the example for us, as we are about to see in the opening verses of Mark's gospel. Listen to God's word.

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,"

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 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.

That's how Mark starts. No genealogies. No Christmas story with songs or angels or shepherds or magi like Matthew or Luke. No deep theological assertions like in John. Nope. Mark just says, "Let's get going. Chop chop! This is 'the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ...'" "Gospel" means (what?) Good news! Mark launches right into the good news of Jesus. Jesus Christ IS the good news of God. Not what he taught; not what he did. But who he is. Jesus is the good news that God has not abandoned his world. The good news that God still loves us and wants a relationship with us. The good

news that even though we have turned away from God and lived our own way...God longs to forgive us and make all things right.

And Jesus is the way God does that. He is what the Old Testament calls the "Messiah;" "the anointed one" in Hebrew. The one upon whom God poured out... anointed... his Holy Spirit. (By the way, the Greek translation of "messiah" is...do you know... Christ!)

This is the good news...the gospel... of our Messiah: that though we were living lives of spiritual rebellion and had no way of making things right with God... God came to make things right with us. That's the gospel...and Mark's gospel starts with John the Baptist. John was Jesus' opening act. If you've ever paid big money to go to a concert, you sit through 45 minutes of someone else before you hear the artist you paid to see. By the time they are done, you are revved up for the main act, aren't you?

Old Testament prophets like Isaiah promised that before God sent his Messiah, he would send an opening act. One who would prepare the way for the main event. That person was John the Baptizer; Mark starts his gospel with Baptism.

Now, there are two ways we must think about baptism. You are baptized OUT of something...and you are baptized INTO something. First, you are baptized OUT of something. What baptism did John offer? It was a baptism of repentance. That's a very churchy word. The most helpful image I can offer is this: (U TURN sign) Baptism means "U-TURN." The Greek word *metanoia* means "to turn around and go the other way." Repentance is admitting that you are on a path to destruction...or heartbreak...or meaninglessness. Repentance means saying, "This is stupid. This path is leading me nowhere good! I am going to stop, turn around...and go another way." And that other way is Jesus...who is the ONLY way of life.

I spoke with a young man this week who told me, "I don't think I can keep going this way. What I'm doing is not working. I feel drained. It's sucking the life out of me! I think I need to change." Exactly! That is repentance. Baptism is that moment when you admit that the path you are walking does not lead to the life you want; you stop, you turn around, and walk toward Jesus. In a sense, baptism washes off the dust from your hard and fruitless journey. It is a new beginning in your relationship with God.

John would ask you, "Do you need to repent? To confess that you've been going in a wrong direction?" Maybe you've never been baptized; today could be your new beginning. Or maybe you just haven't lived into your baptism. Well...it's time to start! Stop. Turn. Walk toward Jesus. REPENT. That's what baptism is about.

BUT...that's not ALL baptism is about. We are baptized OUT of our broken past...that is John's baptism of repentance. But we are also baptized INTO the Church. And John couldn't do that. Only Jesus...the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit...can baptize us INTO his church family. Christian baptism has ALWAYS been into the Church. Because part of our wrong path is isolation. God said, "It is not good that man should be alone." He never changed his mind. The new way we walk after repentance and baptism is not a solo pilgrimage in a different direction. The new way of baptism is with God's people. You are always baptized into the church. Always.

It's why you can't baptize yourself. Baptism is always done to you...by a leader of God's church. And it's why we don't do private baptisms; you always proclaim your faith publicly...in front of God's people. Because this isn't just about you and Jesus. It is about you...and Jesus...and his Church family of which you are now a part. This is why we require everyone who is baptized to become a member of our church. Membership is our way of saying you are adopted into the family. You aren't an orphan. Not a foster-child. You are a full-blown member of God's family, entitled to all the rights and privileges thereof.

When we were in North Carolina, Cyndi and I attended church with Rachel. Near the end of the service, the pastor prepared us for a very special baptism; an eight-year-old girl named Alba. Alba lives in an orphanage. She was taken from her parents because of their criminal behavior. A young couple from that church volunteers in that orphanage. They met Alba and fell in love with her. As they shared with Alba about God's family, she said she wanted to join that family. They told her she'd need to be baptized in front of the church. And she was eager.

It was clear that Alba's back story is difficult because the pastor could hardly speak without crying. But he managed to ask Alba to share why she wanted to be baptized. These were her words: "In my mom and dad's house they were doing bad things and I don't want to be like that." Alba went on to confess her faith in Jesus. Then the pastor, still choked up, poured water on her head ...and welcomed her into her new family.

Baptism is about publicly identifying with God's earthly family. Which explains the most puzzling part of our passage. If baptism is ONLY about washing away sin... why was Jesus baptized? If he was sinless, he didn't NEED to repent. But what Jesus did need...what he WANTED...was to publicly identify himself with God's people. Jesus starts his ministry, not by telling everyone else to repent and be baptized into his Church. No, he starts his ministry by modeling what it means to be a PART of God's family. By identifying with us in the waters of baptism. It is so incredibly humble of him, isn't it?

For all of us, whether we are being baptized today or renewing our vows, this is not JUST a walk with Jesus. It is a journey with HIS part of God's family; Chapel Hill. For you, then, it might mean asking a hard question: "Do I behave...as if this is MY church? Or do I act as if it is someone else's church? If you really believe this is YOUR church home...it changes your behavior. You invite people to your home. You welcome people into your home. You serve in your home. You give to support your home. That's what you do for your family. Isn't it?

So...when was the last time you invited someone to your church... or welcomed someone into your pew...or signed up to serve when asked...or gave generously...or gave ANYTHING? Maybe YOUR new beginning is to remind yourself that this is YOUR Church home...not someone else's..... the family that YOU love...into which YOU have been baptized...and for which YOU are responsible.

We are baptized OUT of our former way of life...and INTO a new way of life as a member of God's family. Let's make this more than a ritual today; let's make this a genuine new beginning.

(Here's how this will work. We will begin with the renewal of vows. Everyone who has already been baptized will leave the right side of the pew, come forward and receive the sign of the cross. We will pronounce the words, "Remember your baptism and be thankful." And you will respond, "I am thankful." After that, we will baptize. If you have never been baptized and have not yet been interviewed by a pastor, during the renewals, I invite you to approach one of our elders (point them out). They will listen to your confession of faith and instruct you in your next steps. You may be sprinkled...or if you are up for it...you may be dunked! We will provide the towels!