

Sermon for Jan. 12, 2020
1 Sam. 3: 1-10; Mark 1:4-11

Come Holy Spirit, and stir these words as you stirred the water at our baptisms. Amen.

So What Happens Next?

Anyone walked out on a movie, changed the channel, or shut off an unfinished DVD lately? Anyone started a book, gotten mid-way into it, and then said, "Forget it! I'm not wasting any more time on this!" What would prompt us not to invest another minute in something in which we've already invested many? The answer? We no longer care what happens.

In contrast, why are football games so popular? Why do people turn out in droves to watch the Super Bowl game when they don't even know who is playing? Or line up to see the next installation of Star Wars or James Bond movies? Because we want to know what happens next. We are people willing to get hooked, if getting hooked holds our interest.

That's why the gospels sometimes can be so frustrating. We aren't always told what happens next. Take our gospel this morning, which Mark starts with a bang. An eccentric figure dressed in camel's hair and munching on wild locusts appears on the scene, calling people to be washed clean of their sins. And, instead of shunning this bizarre character, people respond in droves. The whole Judean countryside, we are told, and all the people from Jerusalem show up to listen to this figure and then do what he says--get wet. After years of living with a filthy buildup of sin, the people seem eager to be washed clean and made right with God.

John's much-needed spiritual service felt very good to them, and, for years afterwards, they probably remembered the day of that baptism, and perhaps even spoke of it as a monumental moment in their lives. But . . . what happened next? For all the hoopla and excitement of the day they were baptized in the Jordan River, did that experience make any *lasting* difference to them? Did it change the way they lived? Did it change their communities? Mark doesn't tell us.

What happened next with the paralytic who was lowered through the roof-top and healed? Did he become a follower of Jesus and tell his story to others so that they would believe? What happened next to the man with the withered hand that was healed? What happened next to the five thousand people fed from a few loaves and a couple of fish? What happened next to the woman healed of her hemorrhage and the dead little girl restored to life? What happened next to the families and friends and townspeople after they witnessed these healings and miracles? Were their lives changed, or did they get bored or apathetic and leave the book unfinished? Who knows?

Of course, we do know what happened next to John the Baptist. Answering God's call to come away from his secluded and safe life in the desert, he undertook a period of service, inviting people to take a real look at their lives and to enter into a relationship--not with him, but with someone else. All his work, all his ministry, all his stepping on toes wasn't even for his benefit, but for Christ's. And what happened next was that he lost his head.

And after his own baptism, we know what happened next to Jesus Christ. Answering God's call to come away from his secluded and safe life in Nazareth, he undertook a period of service, inviting people to take a real look at their lives and to enter into a relationship not with him, but with someone else--God. All his work, all his ministry, all his stepping on toes wasn't even for his benefit, but for ours. And what happened next was that he lost his life.

And then there are Paul, and Peter, and Martin Luther, and John Calvin, and John Wesley, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Karl Barth, and Billy Graham, and Mother Teresa, and our grandparents, and our parents, and you, and me, and the "what happened next" in each of our lives. If we have been born of water, whether immersed or doused or sprinkled, like John and like Jesus and like the saints before us, we, too, have been set on a baptismal *journey*.

Baptism isn't a one-time-only special occasion where grandparents take pictures and the congregation oohs and aaahs and wipes away tears. Baptism is a connection to--and inclusion in--the body of Christ. Baptism is an *action*. It enables us to die to our selfishness and our agendas and to rise with Jesus. It makes us dead to sin and alive to God. It gives us new and everlasting life, and the awesome identity as children of a living and loving Lord. It is the beginning of our spiritual journeys and growth, not the culmination.

But if that's all baptism is--a memory--we've made a big mistake. Being called into the body of Christ is being called into service and servanthood. We come up out of the water alive to love and serve others, not ourselves. Further, we don't serve in order to get our needs met, or to earn points, or for recognition, or to persuade God to see things our way. We serve God as our response to the love of God, the God who not only created the earth and everything in it, but who then came to earth to save us from our very selves.

And we make a mistake if we believe that baptism is the beginning of a lifetime of perfect bliss. Think about what happens next after the baptism of Jesus — Mark tells us that the Spirit immediately drives Jesus “out into the wilderness,” where he had to battle all sorts of temptation for comfort, power and possessions. Baptism doesn't protect us from temptation, or seal us in a sinless void, or keep bad things from happening to us. It doesn't work that way. Ask John. Ask Jesus.

Instead, baptism empowers us to resist temptation, invites us back into wholeness when we fail, sends us forth in service, and reminds us that we are not alone. We have the power of the Holy Spirit and the community of the saints, and each other, to encourage and strengthen us.

Today, we ordain (which means to set apart for special service) Sue Mitchell and install Greg Vogel as elders in the Presbyterian Church (USA). They have said yes to a call to be officers not just at St. Andrew but for our entire denomination. Just like Samuel, answering God's call to come away from their routines and comforts, they are undertaking a period of service, inviting us to take a real look at our lives and to enter into a relationship not with them, but with someone else: Jesus Christ. All their work, all their ministry, all their stepping on toes won't even be for their benefit, but for Christ's.

We are also recognizing and celebrating a new member, Lisa Dobbs, who wants to make her public declaration of faith in Jesus Christ to you, her new family. Just like Samuel, she is answering God's call to service, ministry, and inclusion here, at St. Andrew, not for her sake, but for Christ's.

These three people have prayed, discerned, and thought about this next passage in their baptismal journey. It's a big step for them. But they aren't the only ones called to this journey. What's next for the rest of you as Pastor Tripp comes aboard not in a week or two, but in 24 hours? How will your baptism affect how you serve with and follow him? Does your baptism compel you to think about your real connection to each person here, brothers and sisters through the waters of baptism and the blood of Christ, and how you can serve and support one another and this community? Are you ready to turn the page and find out what happens next, not for your sake, but for Christ's? Your answer will make all the difference in your ministry and life here.

I think one reason we don't know how so many gospel stories end is because the author didn't know. Each individual, the paralytic, the hemorrhaging woman, the Jerusalem crowds, the man with the withered hand, had to decide for him or herself what happened next. Each person had to respond to John's invitation to be in relationship with Christ. Each person had to be willing to be hooked and continue on the journey. Some did, and some did not. Some accepted love, and some refused it. As you enter a new year with new leadership and a new chapter in the life of St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, I invite you to think about what it means to be baptized, to consider what happens next on your journey, and to risk making your baptism more than a memory.

To God be the glory.