



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Epiphany 1 (B)

#### Transformed in Baptism

[RCL] Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

*Paul said to the disciples in Ephesus: 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?' They replied, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.' Then he said, 'Into what then were you baptized?' They answered, 'Into John's baptism'" (Acts 19:2-3).*

Into John's baptism. Both the passage from Acts 19 and Mark's gospel agree that John baptized with a baptism of repentance. What does this mean? Who was John the Baptist? Why was he baptizing at the Jordan River, and why was Jesus there?

According to the first-century historian Josephus, John was a popular prophet and holy man who was a contemporary of Jesus. It is likely that John was a member of the Essene renewal movement, a community that lived an ascetic life in the desert at Qumran, in opposition to what they saw as corruption of the leaders in Jerusalem and the Temple. Life in the desert community protested the worldliness of Jewish worship in Jerusalem and the oppressive, colonial rule of the Romans. The Essene rule of life placed emphasis on purity, ritual bathing, and obedience to God's commandments.

John did not invent baptism. Archaeological remains of ancient *mikvahs*, pools for washing away impurities, such as handling blood or contact with skin ailments, have been found at Qumran and near the site of the Temple in Jerusalem. Ritual cleansing before approaching God was a part of Jewish life.

So, too, was repentance a familiar theme in Jewish life, part of a pattern in the story of Israel. Time after time, the biblical narrative shows the people of Israel falling away from God, especially by corrupt worship practices. An angry and just God allows oppression by a foreign power until the people repent, often at the urging of a prophet. Then God sends a deliverer – a prophet, warrior, or king – and peace is restored. Repentance is the necessary pivot point between corruption and oppression, and deliverance and peace.

John, like Jesus, was a charismatic Jewish man who led a renewal movement within Judaism. People were deeply stirred by the words, deeds, and example of the holy man. Mark tells us that people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to be baptized by him in the River

Jordan. It is possible that Jesus was a follower of John and his message of repentance; he traveled all the way from Galilee to the Judean desert to be baptized by him.

Mark places John within the Jewish religious tradition, portraying him as a new Elijah, clothed in camel's hair and eating locusts and wild honey. John gives the common practice of ritual bathing new symbolic meaning. No longer just a ritual to cleanse impurity, it now serves as public testimony of repentance and preparation for the long-awaited coming of the kingdom of God.

John is clear – he is not the deliverer sent by God; he is the messenger, not worthy to untie the sandals of the one who is to come. And this Jesus, who has come to be baptized in the Jordan, is powerful: Not *a* deliverer but *the* deliverer. The author of our salvation. "I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit," John proclaims.

At the beginning of the passage, Mark presents an earthly Jesus, a young man joining a renewal movement led by his charismatic cousin, John. Jesus, fully human Jesus, is baptized in water by John. In that moment, his divinity is confirmed by the appearance of the Holy Spirit and the voice of God. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

The passage from Acts presents, clearly and succinctly, the progression from repentance to deliverer, from John the messenger to Jesus the savior, from baptism by water to baptism by the Holy Spirit:

*Paul said, "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." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. (Acts 19:4-5)*

This passage anticipates the early Christian practice of baptism by water and Holy Spirit, of repentance and forgiveness, a practice that continues to be the entry point to our community in the church, and a confession of our faith in the divine nature of Jesus.

In comparing the gospels, it is often said that there is no birth narrative in Mark. Unlike the gospels of Matthew and Luke, Mark does not include a nativity scene. One might argue that this moment by the Jordan River, when Jesus is called to ministry, his divinity affirmed by the Holy Spirit and God the Father, *is* Mark's birth narrative. For Mark, Jesus' baptism by the Holy Spirit, this proof of his divine nature, is the moment of birth.

A thread that runs through all of today's readings is the transforming nature of the voice of God. In Genesis, the heavens and earth are created by the voice of God. God speaks, "Let there be light"; and there was light. Psalm 29 is a litany of praise to God's voice: The voice of the LORD is over the waters; The voice of the LORD is powerful; The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire. In Mark's gospel, God's voice proclaims: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And with this affirmation, in the presence of the Holy Spirit, Jesus, the divine Son of God, is revealed. Jesus emerges from the waters of baptism renewed, ready to fulfill his purpose and transform the world.

The voice of God effects transformation, sometimes with drama, sometimes out of chaos, sometimes in response to a repentant people. All nature participates in this metamorphosis, as God's voice causes the oaks to whirl and strips the forest bare. The heavens are torn apart as the Holy Spirit descends to confirm Jesus' divinity. God's voice and God's Holy Spirit are active, visible, powerful, radical, disruptive forces for renewal and change. Paul's disciples, when the Holy Spirit came on them at their baptism, spoke in tongues and prophesied, a chaotic and physical manifestation of their transformation.

May we too be transformed. In Baptism. In repentance, prophecy, and confession of faith. Infused with the Holy Spirit in our hearts and God's voice in our ears, may we be renewed.

Let us pray: O God, your Holy Spirit was present at the creation and with Jesus at his baptism: Open our hearts to that same Spirit, and strengthen and guide us to love and serve you and our neighbors; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (*Daily Prayer for All Seasons, Church Publishing*)

***Susan Butterworth, M.A., M.Div,*** is a writer, teacher, singer, and lay minister. She leads *Song & Stillness: Taizé @ MIT*, a weekly ecumenical service of contemplative Taizé prayer at the interfaith chapel at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). She teaches writing and literature to college undergraduates and writes book reviews, essays, and literary reference articles.