



Roanoke, Virginia
Rally Day, September 12, 2021

“Reimagined: Baptism”

Part I of the Sermon Series, “Reimagined.”

Mark 1:1-20

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Rally Day is about beginnings. Programs that have been dormant in the summer, and a few during the pandemic, will start up again this week or at least be announced. In some ways, the programs have been reimagined. We will have Sunday School, but some classes will be combined, some will be hybrid, and some online. Sunday Evening children’s programs will begin again, but they’ll take place outside. Choir will begin again, only delayed, and when they sing it will be with masks.

Today begins a sermon series on the Gospel of Mark called *Reimagined*. In Mark’s Gospel, Israel’s faith, Law, ethics, traditions, disciplines, and hope for the future are all embraced by Mark’s Gospel, but also reimagined through the filter of what we glimpse at the beginning and see at the end: **the cross**.

In this story of reimagining, the Gospel begins slow and then accelerates toward the crucifixion. Each sermon will put the brakes on at different points to take in what is reimagined and consider how we might reimagine our own lives.

The moment of Jesus’ baptism at the beginning of Mark’s Gospel has the shape of Jesus’ ultimate destination in the Gospel; the shape of the cross. Listen for the horizontal and vertical beams. And listen for what Jesus hears: the voice of God.

1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.



² As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way,

³ the voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’”

⁴ John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ 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. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ 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. ⁸ I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

In that moment, baptism is reimagined.

Let me tell you how baptism used to be before this moment.

I remember visiting the ruins of Qumran, the village closest to the caves where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. Those scrolls of Hebrew scriptures were carefully copied by Essenes and then hidden when they knew the Romans would come and destroy the village.

In Jesus' time, Qumran is an Essene village in the arid desert, but also sort of a community center. The Essenes are a separatist bunch—and I mean *separatist to the extreme*. They live as far as they can from towns and cities because they consider them to be incubators of evil. Most Essenes even separate from each other living in tents and caves (They would have fared well in a pandemic).

Many, though, regularly gather in Qumran to meet, sometimes to eat, sometimes to do projects like copy scrolls, and sometimes to bathe.

Yes, *to bathe*. To this day, you can find in the excavated ruins of Qumran five stone baths in which water flows in and out. Each bath has two sets of stairs; one for entering and the other to emerge clean.

I am sure that going into the cold embrace of the water and emerging with the dust of the land and the sweat of the day's labor washed away is an exhilarating experience, but the primary purpose of the baths is not physical cleanliness. It is spiritual cleanliness. If the Essene is earnest and honest in the confession of sins, then maybe through this sacramental rite of washing, he or she can emerge freed of shame and regret, and ready to do better than before. When I say “before,” I am not just talking about the Essene's life up to that point, or even the previous year or day up to that point. It can be the *last few hours*.



That's at least one theory held by some scholars and put forth by our Holy Land guide of why there are five baths in a small village. He told us that the five baths mark the five different times in the day when one is to confess sins, ask forgiveness and be washed. In other words, just as in life we continually have to face the errors of our ways, taking the repentance bath is something to be done over and over again.

Those baths which came of Jewish purification rituals become baptisms- *not* the once in a lifetime baptism of Christian tradition, but the repeated baptisms of those who are self-aware and honest enough to know of their own inability to live pure and perfect lives.

I have to believe that these baptisms could be a powerful and helpful experience.

- Maybe for some they were thoughtless rituals that were done because all the Essenes were doing it.
- Maybe for some it was a show of humility that disguised the pride of those who really didn't believe they needed to own up to, or apologize for, anything.

But for those whose hearts were set in the direction of doing right and whose consciences were weighed by knowing that they too often get in their own way, don't you know that this repeated ritual of washing oneself clean was often a therapeutic experience- a powerful and personal *reset* moment.

They had to be powerful experiences because the ritual was taken on the road. John, a cousin of Jesus, was the most famous of those who would invite others to be baptized, and then guide them through the experience. He became known as the Baptist or Baptizer. The focus of his outreach ministry were the towns and cities where the Essenes saw the greatest evidence of personal and communal corruption. Word would spread within the community that John could be found at some source of water nearby. In our passage, it is the Jordan river, and certainly by the time of our story John was famous and it had to be a large stream or river to accommodate the large crowds. Some would come from curiosity. But others would come because they knew their lives were askew and they were looking for a reset. Certainly to be baptized, to be bathed after confessing one's wrongs, is not all that is needed to live a better life, but if it can help reset, then it had to be a good start.

John would preach about corruption and crimes, the flaws of character and the injustices of the community, about the ways neighbors are exploited and abused. Then he would invite anyone listening who needed a weight lifted from their conscience, to come be baptized as a moment of a new beginning. If you were baptized before but needed to be baptized again, "come on in."

Then, in our passage, Jesus is baptized, and baptism is reimagined. For those who would later follow Jesus, those who would become known as the People of the Way, and then those who would become known as Christians, to be baptized would come to mean something foundational and wonderful, something about who we are in the eyes of God despite all the reasons we have to come clean.



Let's look at the baptism of Jesus as Mark describes it. We don't have in this Gospel what we find in other gospels: John's shock at Jesus wanting to be baptized when John doesn't see that he has done anything for which to repent, nor do we have Jesus insistence that he be baptized anyway. What we have in Jesus' baptism is simply an action and an announcement; the first horizontal and the latter vertical.

The horizontal is *Jesus being baptized by John*. We are told of the act of baptism in a clear, straight-forward, no-words-wasted way. There is nothing special to describe. Jesus' baptism is no different from any other that John performs. Jesus is no different from any one of the masses so jammed on the bank of the Jordan that I imagine a few get their sandals stuck in the mud when they are bumped in.

That's the horizontal action. Then comes the vertical announcement when Jesus comes out of the water. Unlike the thousands along the bank, a voice from heaven is heard by Jesus alone: **"You are my Son, who I love, in whom I am pleased."**

If the story ends here, God's love would be only for Jesus, an only child. But the story begins here. During the rest of the story of Mark's Gospel, the vertical love of God for Jesus shines horizontally as Jesus teaches, heals, and sacrifices for others. This love which seems *uniquely* for Jesus ends up being love shown *through Jesus* for all.

And now, what we proclaim in baptism is not what we have to do to begin again, but what God does in Christ. Christian baptism is not now a washing of sins but an announcement of love. When we have a baptism in this church,

whether of a baby

as we did not long ago when we baptized Margo Gunn,

or of an adult

as will happen in October when Emily Roseman will be baptized,

we proclaim that the vertical truth about God's love of Jesus

is the horizontal truth about us all.

"You are my son," God says to Jesus.

And by God's adopting grace, we are God's children.

"You are loved and I am pleased you exist," God says to Jesus.

And by God's adopting grace, so are we loved

and so do we live by God's pleasure.

We celebrate that Jesus goes down into the water to be baptized for the same reason he goes up on the cross. He does for us what we cannot fully do on our own, and by doing so he witnesses to us what we now believe is the most defining truth of our lives: by grace we live and then we die as those whom God loves and claims as God's own.

But what about our need to face and deal with our regrets, our need to seek a re-set in our lives? A frequent charge made against Christians is that we preach a cheap grace, that with the assurance of God's forgiveness, the wrongs of our lives do not really matter.



Well, here is an important point about reimagining that needs to be remembered throughout Mark's Gospel. What is reimagined doesn't negate what has always been true. We are human, and we need to deal with the basic human struggle to face and seek to overcome that which keeps us from being our best selves. And so, while we Christians do not baptize but once, we confess our sins to God over and over again in worship, and I hope in our daily lives. In that spirit, we all need in our lives those who love us enough to tell us the tough truths. Many need to be in recovery groups or in therapy to follow through their own Five-bath version of regularly facing issues that cannot be dealt with all in a moment.

That is why the whole Gospel story needs to be told. Yes, here at the beginning of the story, the truth about God's love is told in a clear, pristine, truth. But things are about to get messy. The people in Jesus' life- especially those closest to him- will speak and act in ways that will remind Jesus why those Essenes felt they need to be washed of their sins several times in a day. Time and again, Jesus will be disappointed, frustrated, and angered by how people speak and act when they should know they could do better.

But the voice only Jesus hears at the beginning coming vertically from heaven, will be something that will be voiced at the end... not by God, but horizontally by a centurion standing to the side of the cross... spoken by someone who one would expect *not* to know better, but who somehow does. At the cross, the centurion displays a horizontal understanding of a vertical truth, ["Truly this is God's son."](#)

Friends, I know we are not always who we know we should be and who we can be. But remember your baptism. We can do better today because God loves us from beginning to end.

