

In You I am Well Pleased by Caroline Sell

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Mark 1:9-15

Would you join me in prayer? God, be in our speaking, be also in our listening, and in our hearts deep understanding. Amen.

So we've got a few Sundays in a row here where we are thinking about the sacraments. Last week was focused on communion, with the communion table in the middle piled high with many kinds of bread. This week, the baptismal font is front and center, filled with the simple element of water.

Presbyterians have traditionally claimed 2 sacraments, communion and baptism. Sacraments, we believe, are rituals that have special meaning in the worshipping community's life. Christians have believed throughout our history that these are particular signs of God's presence among us.

Our text today features Jesus' baptism and is from the Gospel of Mark chapter 1, verses 9-15 – listen now to what the Spirit is saying to us, God's church:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved;^[h] with you I am well pleased."

¹² And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

So – here's the deal - I don't remember my baptism.

You're probably thinking, "Duh, me neither ... most of us were babies when we were baptized"

Well - actually I was both baptized and confirmed at the end of the 7th grade, about 9 months after beginning to attend church regularly.

[SHOW SLIDE]

Here I am on my baptism and confirmation day. Clearly, I was not excited to have my picture taken...

But it's interesting because even though I was most certainly not a baby, and I'd been taking a confirmation class, and though I do have this photo, I literally remember almost nothing about that day – at least nothing of importance. I don't remember having some big spiritual epiphany. I don't remember feeling the weight of what I was saying or doing.

What I do remember is that my poor mom agreed to fly back early with me from my sister's college graduation so that I could be there. I do remember that I skipped a state cup soccer game and my coach was not thrilled. I also remember my new dress. And I do remember already really valuing the community that I have formed through church, and not wanting to miss out on a day that I knew was special to the community.

[SLIDE DOWN]

The truth is that I didn't think much about my baptism again until college, when I worshiped at a non-denominational church that practiced immersion baptism – that is the type of baptism that typically occurs when you're at some age in which you feel ready to make a profession of faith. As I watched baptisms by immersion during college, I have to admit that there was something about these baptisms that I was drawn toward. I respected the bold testimonies of faith that friends would give prior to their baptism, and I found the visual of being fully covered by water to be powerful.

Fast forwarding several years later, I found myself in my first year of seminary considering ordination in the Presbyterian Church USA. Having already worked in multiple church traditions, baptism was just one of many areas of theology and church life that I wrestled with and had to figure out where I landed best.

I learned that year that Presbyterians are all about grace, and that while certainly any adult wishing to be baptized can and should certainly be, infant baptism is emphasized because we believe that there's nothing we have done or can do to earn a relationship with God. Infant baptism reminds us all that God loves us and accepts us before we could possibly do anything to earn such love. And infant baptism is a time for the community to officially welcome the newly baptized into the Body of Christ.

Now, these beliefs made a lot of sense to me right off the bat. But I also feared, and sometimes still do fear, that infant baptism can become just a rote ritual that gives us an excuse to parade a cute kid around the sanctuary. I fear that it can accidentally send the message that you better get baptized in order to be saved. And I fear sometimes infant baptism can lead to apathetic faith later in life.¹

¹ Howard L. Rice and James C. Huffstutler, *Reformed Worship*, Geneva Press (Louisville, 2001), 59.

But as I read and studied, I also remembered my own story of baptism. And the more I thought about my baptism, the more I realized how much my experience aligns with the Presbyterian understanding of baptism. I considered how little I remembered of my baptism, yet how engrained in my identity my baptism has become.

You see, I know that – even if I don’t have a clue who said it or what exactly was said - it was on that day that I was told that God claims me as beloved child, not because of anything I’ve done, but simply because God loves me.

It was that day that I was told that there’s nothing that I can do to separate me from the love of God.

And it was on that day that a wonderful Christian community welcomed me and committed to teaching me and raising me in faith.

In our text today from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is baptized. Then the Spirit sends Jesus to the wilderness, and then sends him back out into Galilee to begin his time of ministry. If there’s just one thing to take away about Mark’s gospel, it’s that Mark moves fast. Like a reporter, he gives us the necessary facts and then moves on. Hence why today we get 3 stories in the span of about 6 verses.

In the first story, Jesus’ baptism, the heavens are torn apart with the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus and God’s voice breaking through, saying, “You are my beloved; in you I am well pleased.” Other gospels change this word to just say the heavens “opened,” but I think Mark wants to get the point across that something fundamental has been changed. When you tear something, no matter how smooth a tear, it’s pretty impossible to put back together just as it was. Sure, it can be patched or mended, but it’s never really the same again. So as the heavens are torn, something irreversible happens – Jesus’ identity is claimed beloved, and because of him all the world can know themselves as beloved too.

Then the text keeps moving - just as quickly as the baptism happens, Jesus is driven to the wilderness, where’s he’s tempted for 40 days to abandon his newfound identity as the beloved.

What kind of place do you imagine when you hear that Jesus was in the wilderness?

It’s tempting to imagine a place where you might typically go to hike or escape the demands of everyday life. But I’m not sure this really is the types of wilderness the text is referring to. As theologian and pastor Barbara Brown Taylor said in a recent talk, “That’s not the wilderness, that’s a park.” The wilderness, she says, always involves significant risk. Specifically, a risk of death to who we *thought* we knew ourselves to be in this world or how we *thought* we knew the world to function.²

² Barbara Brown Taylor, lecture at “Evolving Faith” conference in Denver, CO on October 4, 2019.

She continues, saying, “If you’ve ever spent any time in a radiology oncology unit, that’s a wilderness. So is a neighborhood where parents have to teach kids what to do when they hear gunfire. A dying church, a wilderness. Addiction, a wilderness. Losing too many friends all at once is a wilderness, especially when they are young. Aging is a wilderness. Deep love for this suffering planet is a wilderness.

Basically anything that shows you how breakable you are, how breakable everything is, does the trick. Which means – face it – wilderness is not optional; it’s part of the human condition; and no one gets a pass.”

Jesus, too is fully human, so his wilderness experience is full of temptation to abandon who he knows himself to be. The tempter shows up in strength, trying to figure out how breakable Jesus really is. The tempter says to Jesus, “You’ve heard that you’re the beloved. Well – are you sure? How do you know? Go ahead and prove it with a miracle, something that only God is capable of. Prove it to me, and prove it to yourself.”

But Jesus is unwavering. As Henri Nouwen writes, Jesus’ reply is that “I don’t have to prove that I am worthy of love. I am the Beloved of God, the One on whom God’s favor rests.”³

Does that language sound familiar? It’s because it’s exactly what Jesus just heard in his baptism! God just told him that he is the beloved. The truth is, all of us will find ourselves in the wilderness, and any identity we have formed of ourselves before the wilderness will be challenged. In fact, some of us might feel like we’re in the wilderness right now. As we are challenged in the wilderness, it will be tempting to also forget the identity that of our baptism gifts us – that is the identity that we are beloved beyond measure – and replace it instead with an identity that the world imposes.

There’s a joke that some people will say to you as you head off to seminary. They’ll say, “Don’t let seminary become a cemetery.” Honestly, I never found the joke very funny, but I think it is birthed out of the fact that seminary can be a really difficult place for many pastors in training, a kind of wilderness. I know this to be the case at the seminary where I attended, Princeton Seminary, a place full of 20 and 30 somethings who had all composed beautiful essays about how God had called them to a life of ministry, packed their bags with eagerness, and then quickly and suddenly found themselves in a strange wilderness where everyone else seemed to be better read or more articulate or more prepared for a life in ministry. This wilderness, for many first-year seminary students, reveals how breakable this identity of self-reliance really is.

So every year our campus minister, Jan Ammon, opened the academic year with the same chapel sermon (some of you on the women’s retreat heard me talk about this). It was Jan’s Imposter Syndrome sermon. She said the imposter was that voice in our heads saying to us, “*You’re* just an imposter. You aren’t really meant to be here. You don’t belong. You *really* aren’t as good or smart or kind as others think you are – you can keep trying to cover it up – but at

³ Henri Nouwen, *Here and Now*, The Crossroad Publishing Company (New York: 1995), 99-100.

some point someone is going to find out that it's all an act." And maybe that's true – maybe none of us *were* as smart or gifted as we once thought.

But that's not the basis of our identity, Jan would remind us. We, too, can claim the truth that Jesus claims in the wilderness, saying "I don't have to prove that I am worthy of love. God loves me no matter where I am or what I do. And nothing can change that."

That's the language of the baptismal promise. That's the language we have to remember. As Martin Luther once put it, "Remember your baptism and be glad."

While we will all spend time in the wilderness, the wilderness isn't forever. Just as quickly as can feel tossed into the wilderness, the wilderness will toss us right back out into, the civilized world, the world that the wilderness has prepared us for.

If we can remember the promise of baptism, we can weather the wilderness.

You may or may not remember your baptism. You may not even be baptized. But the fact of the matter is that the same truths proclaimed at baptism is still true for each of us. Our baptisms make a claim on our identity. When we find ourselves in the wilderness, these truths are there for us to sink into and draw strength from. You are the beloved children of God, and God is well pleased. Never forget that. Amen.
