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Beyond the waters  
Martin Grove United Church  
January 7, 2017  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 19:1-7 and Mark 1:4-11

I'm so glad 2017 is over. More specifically, I'm glad that we have moved beyond year "A" in the lectionary. Year "B" - the year we are now in - is my favourite year. And that's mainly because while year "A" primarily uses Matthew for the gospel readings, year "B" uses Mark for most of the gospel readings. And I love the Gospel of Mark! Why, do you ask? Well, the simplest example comes from today's reading: The baptism of Jesus.

The stories in Matthew and in Mark are quite similar, of course, but in Matthew, when Jesus emerges from the water, the voice says, "This is my son, the beloved". In Mark, as we just read, the voice says, "You are my son, the beloved". Is that a big difference? For me, yes. Because in Matthew, the voice is directed at the crowd, whereas in Mark, the voice is directed to Jesus alone. But I will admit, that difference is fairly small compared to the differences between Matthew and Mark's telling of other stories. Consider the story where Jesus spends time in the wilderness. Do you think that Jesus was tempted by the devil 3 times? If so, then you are thinking of the story in Matthew or Luke. In Mark, Jesus's temptation in the wilderness is only 2 short verses, and there is no real detail at all to the nature of the temptations. In Matthew, we hear about three very specific temptations, and we even get a record of a dialog between Jesus and the devil. In Mark, it basically says "Jesus was tempted" and then we are on to the next story.

I like to think of these differences between the gospels in terms of different movie types. If the Gospel of Mark was a movie it would be the equivalent of a documentary made using a jiggly hand-held camera. It might even be in black-and-white. The editing was done with little effort - the continuity between scenes is absent. And the plot line is not really explained. We know who the characters are, and we see the action, but we're just not sure we are always getting the point that the original director had in mind.

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In contrast, if the Gospel of Matthew was a movie, it would be a big Hollywood blockbuster. The audio and video are exceptional. The continuity between scenes is flawless. And the narrative elements are woven together into a coherent and inviting story. We would have no trouble imagining what message the director was trying to convey. Matthew contains the sort of catchy quotes you might find on bumper stickers. After watching Matthew the movie, you might even expect to purchase souvenirs on the way out of the theatre. Matthew is a complete marketing package. And as an added bonus, Matthew does not upset the status quo too much.

Those differences between Mark and Matthew shouldn't really surprise us too much. All of the written gospel records came from oral stories after all. Matthew was written after Mark and the oral stories had probably become more jelled as time went on.

In some ways Matthew is more compelling. We are drawn to narrative. And we can relate more easily to characters who say and do things. And yet, I really prefer to read Mark. Because although Mark is in some ways more of an "amateur" production - it is unpolished, untouched, or at least, less polished and less touched. It is for that reason more pure, more raw, more authentic than Matthew. It is a more original form of the Jesus stories. Mark is also much more unsettling to the status quo. Moreover, Mark usually leaves us with a lot of room for mystery and uncertainty.

Anyway, I look forward to discovering the beauty and openness of Mark with you all this year. Do yourself a favour and read Mark in one sitting - it's only 16 short chapters. And be open to the rawness and power of the story of Jesus as told by Mark.

The story in Acts is also quite interesting. Paul comes upon an early Christian community and discovers that they were baptized, but did not receive the spirit. They had participated in the right ritual, and yet had missed the point of the ritual, which was the coming of the spirit. Does that sound strange to us? Or does that sound normal? How often do we engage in a particular action or ritual, and yet afterwards feel that we have somehow missed the point of the action?

I spoke with someone this week who was lamenting that they didn't feel the spirit of Christmas this year. They had done all of the "right" activities, both inside and outside church, and yet, this person didn't find what they had hoped for, which they called "The

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Spirit of Christmas”. I think following rituals and missing the point is actually something we are quite proficient at in our society! Sometimes, it’s possible that our expectations are just not realistic. Sometimes, of course, the rituals themselves just don’t deliver for some reason.

In reflecting on baptism at the time of Jesus, John Petty says, “Jerusalem was a company town. Some of the inhabitants literally lived in the shadow of the temple, and thousands worked there. The temple had it's own tradition-approved mechanisms for repentance and dealing with sin. Institutional and traditional religion, always expert at sin, had sin covered. The Lord God, however, was not operating through the existing institutional channel of the temple, but rather, the 'voice' directed the people to the uncharted territory of the wilderness. The people went there to confess their sins and not to the temple. In other words, [the people] walked right by where they were supposed to go and went instead to see a prophetic preacher out in the middle of nowhere.”

And yet, I wonder - did the people fail to find redemption in the temple because the temple was not providing the right activities and services, or did the people fail to find redemption in the temple because they were looking for the wrong thing altogether. And how many people went to John for baptism, participated, and yet walked away dejected, heads down, because they hadn’t felt the spirit of redemption from John either.

Perhaps redemption doesn’t come in a nice package. Perhaps redemption doesn’t come in an instant. Perhaps redemption isn’t an event at all, but a process. Perhaps the expectation of receiving the spirit at baptism is not about being “fixed” in the blink of an eye, but rather, that receiving the spirit is the beginning a journey with the spirit - a journey that will last your lifetime. For Jesus, his baptism was literally the beginning of his journey - his public ministry. Mark begins when Jesus steps into the water. Or perhaps we should say that Jesus ministry begins when Jesus steps out of the water.

Is baptism an quick event, or is baptism the start of a journey? Baptism - like all sacraments, and like life itself, is a case where to a large extent, you get out what you put in. And yes, I believe that baptism is best understood as the start of a journey. These fingers are not magic, and the water we use in baptism is only tap water. However, if we are open to the presence of the spirit, baptism is transformative.

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In the words of Teri Peterson, “The Spirit changes things - brings life, but also chaos. There are cacophany and unmediated communication, breath and wind and flame and water, all of which both create and destroy. This is what happens in baptism, of course. Gone is the predictable tradition we've carefully built up to control our experience of God, ... [in] its place is possibility, calling out in unexpected ways through strange voices. Water needs only the smallest crack to seep in, and the Spirit seeps in with those baptismal waters.”

I'm sure we have all seen evidence of the power of water. Allow water to build up in a small crack in your driveway, and after one winter you will have a much larger crack. Or consider the river gorge where we find Niagara Falls. The edge of the falls as you may know, have moved about 11 km in the last 12,000 years, and is now moving at a rate of about 1 foot per year. Water is that powerful. Water can accomplish great things over time.

And the waters of baptism can accomplish great things in your own life too - over time. When we are touched by the spirit we are changed. Some of us can share stories of rapid change, and other of us would share stories about being slowly changed over time, but the spirit brings change. Water brings change. Baptism brings change. Baptism isn't about the water itself. Baptism is about what is beyond the water - faith and life.

Anything meaningful in life takes time. Even when we have “instant” change, it takes time for that change to percolate into our sense of self. And acceptance of your own baptism can take a lifetime. That's why many people - good, faithful church people - if they are honest - understand that they don't completely understand sacraments like baptism and communion, nor do we need to. We - as human beings - are all works in progress. Why would we expect faith to be any different.

For most of us, faith is not a magic moment that happens one day. Faith is a long, slow, exciting process that takes as long as it needs to take. And like any process, there are ups and downs along the way. Of course there are! I am a very thoughtful person, seminary-trained, who has been in church my whole life. And my faith is still growing and developing. I'll let you know if I ever think I have all the answers. But don't hold your breath for that.

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And that's good news. We do not have to be perfect. We just have to see life and faith as a journey, and to remember that we have all been blessed with a superpower that is even better than X-ray vision. We have the superpower in having the ability to change our own minds. And we have another superpower too - each other. This place - this church - this community of faith can be your support network. We are all in this together, and God is present. What more do we need?

A new year awaits us all. What do you want to do this year? In what ways do you want to grow? Step out of the baptismal waters and continue your journey of faith. The spirit continues. Our faith continues. Our journey continues. Thanks be to God.

*Amen.*