

“DEFINING MOMENTS”
Genesis 1:1-15; Mark 1:4-11
January 11, 2009
The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger

Mark, unlike the other three gospel writers, begins his story of the good news of Jesus Christ directly with the coming of John the Baptizer. There is no birth narrative in Mark's gospel, no prologue, no shepherds or wise men, only “the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.” A mere four verses into the gospel, Jesus is 30 years old and finding his way from the town of Nazareth to the banks of the Jordan River where John is preaching and baptizing. Mark does not tell us what motivated Jesus to come out to see John; we aren't told anything about Jesus' life to this point. We only know that John was in the region; that Jesus went to him; that John baptized Jesus; and as Jesus emerged from the river, water dripping in his eyes and running from his body, everything changed for him.

Other than Mark, who tells of the importance of Jesus' baptism directly if sparsely, the other gospel writers are intriguingly squeamish about Jesus being baptized, about what it might imply about the relationship between Jesus and John. And I'm going to take a minute here to show you how this plays out in the gospels, partly because I'm personally fascinated by it, but also to show you how biblical detectives figure things out both from what is and from what is not in the text. Matthew, the next gospel writer chronologically, expands Mark's baptism narrative with a conversation that tells us in no uncertain terms that John only baptized Jesus because Jesus insisted, and then at other points in his gospel states uncompromisingly that between John and Jesus, Jesus is the greater. Why does he feel he has to make that clear? Luke deals with the relationship between John and Jesus by constructing his birth narrative in such a way as to make natural a relationship between the two men—John as son of Elizabeth, Jesus as son of Mary her cousin; but the story also makes clear that, even before they are born, we know Jesus is more important. The story of Jesus and John being related is most likely not factual, something that troubles some modern readers but not Luke's original audience. The story makes its points. In the conventions of first century writing that would be acceptable. Finally, in the fourth gospel, John the gospel writer never says that John baptized Jesus. He studiously avoids saying it. He finesses the subject, makes the occasion of John's baptizing an opportunity for John to point to Jesus to tell us that he, John, baptizes with water, but Jesus with the Holy spirit, that John is a messenger and Jesus the Son of God.

So what is all this dodging and dancing and insisting about? Many scholars believe that after the deaths of both John the Baptist and Jesus, there was a group of John's disciples who were still around and who taunted the early church with the contention that since John was important to Jesus and, in fact, baptized him, that meant that their great rabbi John was greater than the church's great rabbi, Jesus. Classic “Our guy was better than your guy.” This claim obviously had some traction, because it continued and gained strength for a long time, maybe for 70 years after Jesus' death. With that kind of longevity, it's possible, if not probable, that the relationship between John and Jesus was more than the gospels tell us, that the two men were in fact close, that John spent some significant period of time as Jesus' teacher/mentor, that maybe even Jesus grew to self-awareness—who he was, what he was to do—as one of John's disciples. As the infant church began to grow up, as its theology of Jesus as Son of God became more developed, more exalted, the church grew uncomfortable, embarrassed about John and his relationship with Jesus. Why would the Son of God need a human teacher? There's nothing in the Hebrew scriptures that prophesies that the Messiah would need a coach. That seemed problematic to the early church. And so we speculate that the church writers deliberately downplayed John's role in Jesus' life. Interesting. An unintended glimpse into the values of the early church.

So, my question of the day: Are your theological sensibilities distressed by the thought that Jesus might have had a teacher, that it was, at least in part, the attention of a human mentor that allowed Jesus his awareness of and commitment to his vocation? For myself, I find it not disturbing, but compelling. Jesus

was 30 years old, or close to it, when he began his ministry. In the terms of his culture, he had been an adult for over a decade; he was well into middle age. What did he do all those years? We don't know. Because the gospels tell us that Joseph was a carpenter, we have sort of assumed that Jesus followed in his footsteps. But why didn't Jesus start his ministry sooner? Have you ever asked yourself that question? Why did he wait so long? I am more than a little intrigued by the thought that for all those years, the potential was there in Jesus, but somehow dormant or unfocused. And then he met John, and under John's tutelage, his understanding of God, his understanding of himself, his understanding of what might be grew until the moment he chose to be baptized, and the skies opened, and the voice of God was clear in his head, and he knew his destiny.

It is no disrespect to Jesus to consider that even he, in the fullness of his humanity, had within him more than one possibility of becoming. If we consider that, it takes the event of his baptism, and makes that baptism more than the particular story of the defining moment of the one who would be called Son of God. Now the story beckons us towards both an inward and outward journey of our own. How have we, each of us, become the people we are right now? If you were to tell the story of who you are, and what you do, and what you value, what and who would you include as significant?

We all have defining moments in our lives—events, people, choices that cause us to develop ourselves more in one area than in another. My father became a pediatrician in large part because he had a younger brother who died of tuberculosis. William Sloane Coffin, one of my mentors, left the CIA and decided to pursue a call to ministry in large part because of his conversations with and admiration for then Yale Chaplain Sid Lovatt. Vincent Van Gogh, following in his father's footsteps, became a missionary to poor miners in Belgium. Though he quit that work and turned to painting, his time with the miners significantly influenced his art. When we think about our own becoming, it is interesting to reflect on the influences and choices that brought us to where we are now. But even more important, I think, is to be open about where we can go from here. Jesus was 30 years old when he left his old life behind and took up the proclamation of the kingdom of God. Now 30 seems young to many of us, but by the canons of his culture, Jesus had reached an age where all the significant choices of his life should have been behind him. Yet he started over; he began a new thing.

It would be naïve to say that it is never too late to make new choices about our lives, about the possibilities before us, about what we can become. I probably could not decide to become an opera singer today and succeed. But too many of us close down the possibilities before us too soon. God has made us humans wonderfully complex and multi-faceted beings, and we never know when an event or a circumstance or a person will open our eyes and give us the opportunity to be and do something different, surprising. When we think about the baptism of Jesus, when we see God doing a new thing in Jesus, it should remind us that God might offer to do a new thing in us as well.

That's the inward journey we can take when we consider the story of Jesus' baptism: to reflect on how we have come to be who we are, and to ponder our continuing becoming. But there's also an outward journey. Jesus was born because Mary and Joseph consented to bear him. That's at the center of our Christmas story; what God and two committed humans did together. I believe that years later Jesus became most fully who he was destined to be not only through the power of God but also because a man named John saw something in him, chose to take an interest in him, nurtured his great possibility. Maybe that's heresy, but to me it's merely a continuation of the original storyline. And it leaves us with a significant challenge. All around, there are people whose sense of what life can be is stunted, is limited, both by circumstance and because no one yet has come into their life and given them the interest, the encouragement, the tools necessary for them to explore potential aspects of their becoming. Children, youth, and adults: from the people I meet at Community Outreach to my back door neighbor. We all need those who open doors and windows for us, put a mirror to our faces and show us what we have not previously seen. So the question is: what do you have to give? Where in your life can you find the

opportunity to listen, to explore, to be a mentor, to be a friend? Think about what might have happened had John the Baptizer not met Jesus. We might be telling a different story today. You, too, can make a difference. Thanks be to God. Amen.