

**January 8, 2017**

**Sermon: Ambush Baptism      Pastor Clay Oglesbee**

**Texts: Mark 1:4-11**

Normally, we want the meaning of our lives linked, not to the spiritual deconstruction we call repentance, but to climbing the career ladder, marrying the queen or king of the prom, winning the athletic trophies.

Normally, a man or a woman knows that their biographer or a historian will report that he or she graduates *magna cum laude*, launches a company, raises a family of rocket scientists, invents a product, completes military service, farms for 40 years, or, it may be,...robs, steals, lies, adulterers and commits atrocities.

Whatever makes them notable or notorious. Whatever makes us famous for 15 minutes. A reputation and a narrative accumulate and are developed, and they become the “truth” about the person. We say, for example, “Hubert Humphrey was a statesman.” “Elvis is the King.” “Britney Spears is a teen idol.” And this is, from that human and historical point of view, the publicly triumphant or publicly shameful meaning of that life.

But the gospel’s baptism by cleansing water and purifying fire will not accept these stories as the bottom-line about any life. I mean, the gospel’s baptism will fiercely dispute whether things done well or poorly, great acts or small, motives true or false, are what is most significant about a life. These are not the ultimate meaning of any life. As Karl Barth expressed it in one of

his works, “Baptism...declares...(that human beings) stand, *prior* to all their experiences and decisions, within the sphere of God’s lordship....(Human beings) must let go and abandon all *imported* assurance....(We are in baptism) *thrown completely* upon free grace...”

Now, not everyone *likes* being thrown “completely upon free grace”! Not everyone wants repentance, or inner cleansing from sin, or new life in Christ, or belonging to the household of faith to be the meaning and story at the core of their life!

In a Dear Abby column that appeared in the Minneapolis newspaper a few weeks ago, a young woman wrote to complain that her husband’s family was so concerned about the fact that she had never been baptized that they *arranged* one for her. When she came through the front door of their home one evening, they dumped a whole bucket of water over her head, and shouted out, “We baptize you...in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit!” They were nuts. After that, they were jubilant—and she was furious. Her question for Abby was, “Have I been baptized or not?”

Why do you suppose she was outraged? “Abby” properly answered that there was no baptism that took place, only an ambush with water. I agree: there was no baptism, because there was no seeking, no heartfelt repentance, no consent to God’s grace, and in this case,

no final entrusting of the true name and meaning of one's life to God alone.

It's understandable, though. Baptism often means more to people who have *not* been baptized than it does to those who *have*. Most of us, baptized as infants or children, have perhaps never in our lives quite thought or felt enough about how deep that water is. The story of John's baptizing of Jesus and of others at the Jordan River ought to tell us something that makes us approach the river-banks of our baptism cautiously.

Think about it. Mark's gospel-version warns that a 180 degree about-face of repentance will be required of our attitudes and behaviors. Matthew's gospel-version is even more explicit; *lives* will be *uprooted* by baptism, he says, and some lives will be good for nothing but kindling in the fires of wasted and trivial existences. Luke's gospel-version presses hard, too, lambasting as *unbaptizable* certain human habits, like stinginess toward the poor and corrupt performance of one's duties. Even the original Greek term *baptisma* means not *only* to *dip* in water, but, more vividly and more pertinently, even to *destroy*, as a person is destroyed by drowning or a ship is destroyed by sinking. So, no wonder the young woman was mad about that ambush baptism. She knew, as few Christians do, you don't come to these waters unless you expect to base your entire heart, mind and soul on union with God.

Years ago, I participated in a training academy where we were asked to record the events of our personal lives on a time-line, examine them, read the trajectories, so to speak and come up with a meaning statement for our lives. I did it, then, and have continued to do it periodically ever since, over 25 years now. I do it because the exercise helps me to remember who I am and what I am about in life.

But something interesting and unsought happened the last time I played that game. I laid out the long base line, and marked it with the years of my life-span in five-year increments. And just as I began to recollect the significant events that an imaginary biographer might, there was a sudden new turn to my thoughts. For the first time in 25 years of playing that game, I stopped, as Barth suggested, “importing assurance” from my own “experiences and decisions”. The first “event” I noted was the sacrament of my baptism, my “drowning” into a new life in Christ, and after that the *only* other events I noted were the quasi-sacramental ones: my confirmation, my marriage, the births of my children, my ordination with the Methodists, and my oblation with the Benedictines. Then I stopped. Just stopped. I added no further stories, no notes about my education, my volunteer work, my professional accomplishments or disappointments, my adventures or doldrums, my financial peaks or valleys, my heroisms or my complaints, my affections or my enmities, my gains or my losses. None of those things did I record, though I

did not know why I held off: “I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Philippians 3:8).

A thought came to me from nowhere, “Is it enough? Could it possibly be reliably true that the free gift of God’s kindness alone, of baptismal water alone, of dying and rising with Christ alone, gives a human life its sufficient origin, its sufficient meaning, its sufficient destiny? Is *everything* else in life just more or less grateful or ungrateful, more or less happy or unhappy, more or less lucid or confused, commentary on God’s basic mercy toward me, toward all of us, symbolized in our baptism?”

I found that my answer was just Yes. Yes, Baptism is the sufficient meaning. Yes, God’s gracious love, shown me in the mystery of Christ’s incarnation, life, passion and resurrection, is the whole truth. Yes, if someone wrote of my life that “this human being was baptized into the life of Christ, and everything else—whether truly or falsely pursued--was founded on that event”, then the whole story and the whole truth would have been told.

I have difficulty explaining to you how such a meditation feels. It was both appalling and liberating. It was appalling because it was like having your favorite character in a book *die* without getting the girl, riding away with the knight in shining armor, or winning the lottery. It was appalling because it wasn’t heroic at all.

All of my life I have wanted, as I expect many of you have wanted, to heroically and cumulatively construct the meaning of our days, inch by inch, day by day, accomplishment by accomplishment—and to call that human construction “God’s will.” Suddenly, the game took all of this away. It stripped me of my striving. The spiritual game informed me about my life more deeply than anything I ever did well or poorly: baptism told me, “You are in Christ...Do you not know...that you are not your own?” (1 Corinthians 6:19).

The liberating part of this is that your new life is given to you, simple and settled with no unresolved theatrics about failures or successes, embarrassments or triumphs. There is an old African-American spiritual that captures this. One repeated line goes like this: “Ah tol’ Jesus it would be all right, if He changed mah name.” Later in the song, warnings come: Jesus told me ah would have to be humble, if he changed mah name...and again, Jesus told me the world would be ‘gainst me if he changed mah name. And, at the end, the singer makes a final choice, “But ah told Jesus it would be alright if he changed mah name.” Baptism, the sacrament of gracious forgiveness, is the sacrament of the end, the drowning of all our old name and nature by water, and it is the sacrament of the beginning, the birth of the new name and nature.