STILL SEEKING HIM

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Mark 1:4-11

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# SETTING THE CONTEXT

What this passage says must be important; the lectionary (which is a 3-year schedule of Bible readings set by the church) had us read part of it twice in just a month. In December, I read the first verses of Mark’s Gospel which talked about John the Baptist as the prophet preparing the way for Jesus and the one baptizing people from all over the countryside. (This passage starts with John baptizing people from all over the area.) Advent is the season of preparation. Part of the preparation for receiving the gift of Jesus is knowing we need him. It is examining our lives and seeing what we need to change. After Christmas, we are invited to not only receive the gift but to allow it to lead us in a new direction. The people coming to John for baptism came because they wanted to change their hearts and lives and receive God’s forgiveness. **The remarkable thing is that Jesus joined them in line.** He didn’t come in as one above all the people in line; he joined the line with those needing to change. It’s hard to lead a line, if you’re not in it.

Read Mark 1:4-11

# THE SERMON

There is nothing like a good shower after getting all dirty and sweaty. When I was in college, I did wilderness hiking. One spring break, I hiked the Grand Canyon for a week with other students. I’ll tell you what after coming out of the canyon hot, sweaty and dusty from five days on the trail, that first shower was heavenly. Being washed clean, watching the dirt and sweat flow off me and down the drain is a feeling I can still recall and savor. **The new year can feel like that shower; it is a time when we think about fresh starts.** We make resolutions or plans for what we want to be different in our lives in this new year. If the year before has been a tough one, we look to the new year in hopes of better days. Remember our definition of hope from Advent- our present does not have to be our future.

A group of people standing next to a body of water

Description generated with very high confidenceJohn the Baptist used the waters of the Jordan River to ritually wash people clean from the dirt and grim that collects on the soul and in the heart. It was a ritual symbolizing the desire to walk in a new way, to get a fresh start. Before I went to Israel, I imagined John the Baptist’s river scene like being at Rocky Point- the water is clear and warm. It’s not quite the way I imagined it. In this video clip, Rev. Adam Hamilton shows you the section of the Jordan River where many scholars think John the Baptist did his ministry.

*Watch video clip from Adam Hamilton’s The Way DVD Session 1* *4:28 - 5:35.[[1]](#endnote-1) or look at this photo is of the Jordan River in the same area.*

The Jordan River is muddy and cold, full of reeds and overhanging grasses. Maybe that a better metaphor for baptism. **God meets us in the muddy, reedy, overgrown landscape of human life to invite us to walk in God’s way.** Jesus did not place himself outside the line, he joined that line of people who were seeking something better, seeking God’s forgiveness. The one we welcomed at Christmas as Emmanuel, *God-with-us*, was still Emmanuel, God-with-us, thirty years later when he began his public ministry. The story tells us that as Jesus came out of that muddy water that heaven split open, the Spirit came upon him and he heard sweet words of Divine love and acceptance, words that so many of us long to hear. “You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness.” **This divine affirmation of Jesus is repeated later in Jesus’ life on the Mount of Transfiguration with the added command to the disciples, “Listen to him!” To me baptism answers that divine command with “I will.”**

Whenever we baptize someone here, I always put a few drops of Jordan River water in their baptismal water (Don’t worry, I boiled it after I brought it home from Israel) because our baptism involves participation in Jesus’ baptism. **Baptism is a tangible act that shows the desire to receive God’s love, to change in response to that love and to live in the way of God. We receive the gift that God offers. When we baptize infants, the parents receive that gift for their children and they promise to raise the child knowing the love of God and the way of Christ.** I find baptizing infants so hopeful because we are committing to show them the right path from the very beginning. What could be a better gift to give a child! I love adult baptisms for a different reason; an adult sees the different ways of living life and publicly says, “I choose Jesus.” That is so hopeful to me, too. We, as a community, promise to surround everyone who is baptized, whether children or adults, with a community of love and forgiveness to support that life-long choice.

**In baptism, we join the family of Christ and take his name as our new name, Christian.** We become brothers and sisters in Christ. When we take that name, what we do and how we are matters, not just to the individual, but to all of us. It hurts when I hear people talk about experiences with “Christians” where they are judgmental or rude or condescending because it reflects poorly on all of us and forms a barrier of guardedness toward Christ and all who claim the name *Christian*. **Because we do not always live what we profess, we need the ability to change direction (repent), receive forgiveness and walk in a new way not just once but over and over again.** This year is unusual because Epiphany Sunday falls on the same day as the feast of the Baptism of the Lord. Epiphany celebrates the story in Matthew’s Gospel of the wise men seeking and finding Jesus. The wisemen story begins to reveal who Jesus really is- the one who leads those wise enough to follow him from ill-being to well-being, to a life lived in the way of God. Baptism marks the beginning of that life-long Christian journey to become who God created us to become. ***I love this quote from Dr. Frank Crane, “Growth is God’s plan. God does not make anything as a carpenter makes a bench. God grows everything. When He wants a tree, He begins with an acorn. I have therefore got rid of that gloom which comes from a constant sense of failure and shortcomings. … There is imperfection, but growth implies imperfection. I have not arrived. The true blessedness of humanity is not to arrive, but to travel.***”[[2]](#endnote-2) In the baptism story, we see that God has given us a process for that growth; it is confession- admitting to our imperfection and error, repentance- having a change of heart, mind and direction, and forgiveness. It is a process for growth that can be repeated as often as necessary. **In our baptismal promises, we commit to the direction of our growth; that we desire to grow in Christ-likeness.** We’ll explore these tools that God provides us- confession, repentance and forgiveness in more detail in the coming weeks.

**Country singer, Trace Adkins, sings one of my favorite songs about baptism called Muddy Water.** Before the clip we’re about to see, he spoke about the song and the recognition and awareness that he did not always live up to what he knew was right. But you see in baptism we receive the gift of God, the gift of hope that our present doesn’t have to be our future

(Watch music video of 38 Special & Trace Adkins performing Muddy Water Youtube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-LrPXXa5Yk> [[3]](#endnote-3)

“We don’t always live like we aughta” that’s for sure, but when we seek him, even today, he offers us Amazing Grace. In our baptism liturgy we say, “it is easy, in the midst of life, to forget who we are and whose we are. So, the church is here to remind us that someone greater than we are has named us,claimed us, seeks us and loves us, now and throughout eternity.” **You can’t force people to live in healthy and whole ways, but you can lead them. Perhaps Jesus joined that line of people heading to those muddy waters so that they might follow his lead.** **Maybe we hear the story of John the Baptist twice in a month because the creators of the lectionary knew how much we need to be reminded as we receive the fresh start of a new church year and a new calendar year of that- the gift has been given, he is with you, follow him!** Amen.

1. Adam Hamilton. *“The Way: Walking in the Footsteps of Jesus” DVD, Session 1: Baptism and Temptation.* (Start at 4:28 – stop at 5:35). (Abingdon Press, 2012.) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Gladys C. Murrell. *Doorways to Devotion: Worship Services for Women*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1938), p. 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Video clip from “38 Special & Trace Adkins perform together Muddy Water” Youtube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-LrPXXa5Yk> (start at 1:21-beginning of song -3:38 fade out guitar solo) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)