

Final Sermon @ Grace Church, Amherst
 Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

January 8, 2012
 1st Sunday after Epiphany
 The Baptism of our Lord

“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts, be now and always acceptable to you, O Lord our strength and our redeemer.” AMEN

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From the time we're born, to the time when we leave this earthly life, we're on a journey – a journey which consists of stories that are written in our own personal “book of life” – a journey that's marked by stepping stones – some tiny, some large, but all significant to a greater or lesser degree. Those of you who've done Education for Ministry, for instance, may remember writing your spiritual autobiography using the stepping stone method. It's a helpful way of looking at one's life and discovering the steps, the decisions and, the people that have brought us to this moment in time. As stepping-stones may guide us and help us move from one place to another, so they act as chapters – or sometimes merely sentences – in the story of our lives. I may enter someone's life during one chapter and leave it again after a period of time, sometimes short and sometimes longer, depending on when it's time for each of us to move on. In reality, however, I may know very little of that person's life story and they may know little of mine. Even so, the influence of God's Spirit can make these encounters rich, meaningful and life-changing. So it is with the life-changing encounter between John the Baptist and Jesus, which we heard in our Gospel reading today. Their encounter was rich and meaningful, designed and led by the Spirit – a stepping stone for both of them – even though John, at the time, knew very little about the life of Jesus and we know little of the life of John.

Through stories in the Bible, all we know about John is his parentage, his ministry as a baptizer and his eventual death at the hands of Herod Antipas and his wife, Herodias. There are also missing chapters in Jesus' life. We know little of his childhood years, his adolescence and young adulthood. His baptismal encounter with John becomes the turning point of his ministry and from then on we learn much more of Jesus' life – but, as John, the disciple, points out at the end of his gospel – quote - “there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.” End quote.

However, before we go any further, let's visualize their encounter for a few moments. The scene is the rift valley of the River Jordan, where John is preaching and teaching. Approximately 65 miles in length as the crow flies, this valley runs from the Sea of Galilee in the north, to the Dead Sea in the south, and it ranges in width from approximately 3 to 14 miles. Here, the river is alluvial and dirty-brown in appearance - not particularly enticing water to be submerged in! Because the river drops approximately 600 feet as it travels between the two seas, its current is swift, with many rapids and whirlpools. Few fords act as crossing points. Jagged limestone cliffs fall off to the west, where intermittent valleys pierce broken foothills. The soil is shallow here, but enables the growth of olives, grapes, figs, citrus and even some grain. The population is sparse. Between the center of Judea, which lies to the west of the river, and the Dead Sea lies the traditional “wilderness”, one of the most forbidding and inhospitable deserts

in the world. This is John's territory – away from the legal impurities of city and town life. His habit is simple – a garment of camel's hair tied with a leather belt; his diet of locusts and wild honey is both ritually pure and easily available in the wilderness. People from the surrounding Judean countryside and Jerusalem come flocking to him to be baptized. He's become known as a prophet, perhaps Elijah returned. After so many years without a prophet, John's fame spreads. He has a message the people know they need to hear. John is a humble, self-effacing man, who directs attention, not to himself, but to the One he knows is greater than he is, Jesus.

Jesus steps into this scene on the river's edge, and asks John to baptize him. In some gospel accounts, John protests that he is unworthy to perform such an act – that it should be the other way around – but Jesus insists. As he emerges from his immersion in the river, Jesus and others present see the heavens torn open and the Spirit descending on Him like a dove. God's voice proclaims "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased". One can only begin to imagine the awe, amazement and incredulity with which this is greeted by such a crowd of onlookers.

What's the meaning and the significance of this baptism – this "God-encounter"? For John, baptism was a rite of moral purification, a baptism of public repentance and a preparation for the approaching kingdom of God. Jesus would take that repentance and cleanse a person's life, self and heart. He would baptize people with the Holy Spirit and fill them with spiritual gifts for service.

In Jesus' life, his baptism was a stepping stone, the inaugural event of his public ministry, the beginning of an entirely new chapter. For 30 years, he'd stayed living and working in Nazareth. John's appearance was the sign that he'd been waiting for – a sign that he needed to begin the next chapter in his life and ministry. For him, it was a moment of decision – a decision to accept that sign, that summons and challenge from God. His baptism was a moment of identification. He put himself alongside, rather than apart from, those to whom he came to minister, alongside the sinners whom he came to save. He identified himself with a movement of people returning to God. With the advent of the descending dove and God's voice identifying Jesus as his Son, the Beloved, came God's seal of approval for Jesus' new venture. As the dove descended on him, Jesus became equipped for his new ministry – a ministry of love and gentleness. The dove, if you recall, was known as a symbol of new creation after the flood, as well as being a symbol of gentleness.

As we reflect on these baptisms, I wonder what the sacrament of baptism means for each one of us. The majority of us would have been baptized as infants or as young children and will remember little of the particular event, but, as we will soon do today, we remind ourselves periodically of our baptismal vows. Before we do, perhaps we can take the opportunity to pause for a few moments and ask the Holy Spirit to open our hearts and minds, to help us to listen with fresh ears to the words we speak, to show us something new that we've not thought of before – some new understanding that we can incorporate into our lives – something that may be a stepping stone to move us further along on our faith journey. Perhaps we can hear anew the Good News of the gospel message and be reminded of the gifts and power given to us by the Holy Spirit – the power to know God and to do God's will. Perhaps we can have a renewed sense of the meaning of the baptismal preface that "we're received as God's sons and daughters, made citizens of God's kingdom and given the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth." May we really have a sense of being accepted into a Christian community, a community which is the Body of Christ.

The impact and result of Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan, was a turning point, a stepping stone in the lives of both John the Baptizer and Jesus, as well as it may be in ours. Every encounter we experience in life may not have the same, life-changing significance that this one did. That said, we never know to what extent the Holy Spirit will use an encounter we have with another person to change our heart, our behavior or our life direction. For instance, I'm reminded of an encounter I had a number of years ago with a former Grace parishioner. I "happened" to sit next to her at a meeting. After we'd been in conversation for a few minutes, she suggested that I might be interested in checking out a training course entitled Clinical Pastoral Education. I did. Her suggestion, that I believe was Spirit led, was the beginning of my journey to become a hospital chaplain and, ultimately, a deacon – one of the stepping stones leading to my being here at Grace Church. You might call it a life-changing encounter!

You and I together, have been part of the Grace Community of faith and the Body of Christ for almost five years. I've been so privileged to be a chapter in the life of this corporate body and also in the lives of some of you individually. You've been a very special chapter in mine. In the grand scheme of things, our chapter has been relatively short. Even so, you've blessed me with rich experiences of growth, of sadness and of joy. I thank you all for those blessings. Hopefully, I, through the Holy Spirit, have also blessed you in some way and I pray that I may have. Today, our chapter together in the "diocese of Amherst" is closing. A new chapter for both of us will begin. I pray and have faith that, for each of us, God will continue to bring many blessings and opportunities for growth.

I'd like to close with *my* adaptation of a prayer in Joyce Rupp's book "*Praying our Goodbyes*":

"As we journey onward, may we remember always our love and appreciation for one another.

As we experience the pain of change and the insecurity of moving on, may we also experience the blessing of inner growth;

As we welcome the poor, the pained and the stranger on the way, may we see in each one the face of our Christ;

As we walk through the good times and the hard times, may we never lose sight of the shelter of God's loving arms;

As we question our decisions and wonder about the fruits of our choices, may the peace of God reign in our hearts;

May the future be a source of many enriching and transforming moments.

We praise you and thank you, God of the journey".

AMEN

