

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Identity Matters**

Mark 1:9-15

For Debby and myself, having children whose names are associated with Bible geography fits right into church life, especially on occasions like today. First, there's Jordan. Though he can't be here with us today, I'm sure he would be pleased that today's Scripture passage takes us back to the river that shares his name. Here in Mark's Gospel, we've returned to the Jordan, where John is preaching and baptizing to get God's people ready for God's arrival. Then there's Bethany. She shares a name with a town mentioned several times in the Scriptures, known primarily for being the home of Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha. Earlier in our service, Bethany stepped into our own version of the Jordan, the church baptistery, to publicly profess her faith in Jesus Christ as her Savior.

By doing so, Bethany is associating her name with the name of Jesus. That's part of what baptism signifies and proclaims. It declares that because of your relationship with Jesus, what your name means is inseparable from what Jesus' name means. It says that who you are is inseparable from who Jesus is. And Mark uses the beginning of his Gospel, in a very compact and focused way, to announce the identity of Jesus. The opening verse makes it explicit: "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (v. 1). Then Mark proceeds to show how John the Baptist's preaching fulfills what has come before and points to what's ahead. And what's most immediately ahead is the baptism of Jesus himself.

Mark's telling of the story is short and sweet. There were no announcements in advance in the Sunday bulletin or on the church website. There were no waders for John or white robe for Jesus. No temperature-controlled water. No baptism certificate. No flowers. No photos during or after the service. In fact, the only visual was what Jesus himself saw when he came up out the water. And what a sight it was. The heavens being ripped open. The Spirit making its way down like a descending bird. And with the visuals, a voice. A voice that Jesus heard, telling him, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (v. 11). Mark's aim, like his narrative of the baptism, is simple. He wants us to know that Jesus is the one sent to save us and to put right all that is wrong in this world.

How exactly will this happen? How will sin and death be conquered, and God's people be redeemed? How will evil be overcome and good prevail? How will the devil's dominion be defeated and God's reign be established? Answering these kinds of questions requires telling the rest of this story called the good news about Jesus Christ. Here at Jesus' baptism, we already have the essence of who Jesus is and why he has come. That much has been disclosed to us. But Jesus' identity and purpose have to be unfolded as we follow his life, death, and resurrection. In other words, we need the rest of the story.

As it was for Jesus, so it is for those who identify themselves with Jesus. Every baptized believer has a story that's still unfolding. A story that's shaped by the story of Christ. If you're trusting in Jesus as your Lord and Savior and following him in your daily life, you're in the process of living into and filling out your own narrative of life, death, and the promise of resurrection when Christ comes again. Baptism marks a beginning in which you allow

God to define you and to tell you who you are. Remember that Jesus' own identity is determined by his relationship with the Father. "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." So when you identify yourself with Jesus by repentance and faith, you're declaring that you are who God says you are. You're God's child, loved by God, redeemed by God in Christ, and ready to live out your relationship with the Father.

One teacher tells about a time when one of her first-grade students, Taylor, asked his grandmother if he was a child of God. "Why of course you are, Taylor," she replied. He looked puzzled, then responded, "Well, I better get home and tell Mom and Dad—they think I'm *theirs!*"<sup>1</sup> Today, as we celebrate her baptism, we remember that in one sense, Bethany is my and Debby's child. She belongs to us. But most of all, she belongs to God. She's the Father's child. And now we as parents, coupled with you all as her church family, want her to grow into that relationship and go forward in her own calling and commission to participate in and proclaim the kingdom of God.

Profession of faith and baptism are certainly a defining moment, a critical scene, in a believer's story. But they're not the climactic conclusion. In one sense, they're actually an introduction. They mark the launch of a life of mission. Maybe one of the reasons that Mark keeps his description of Jesus' baptism so brief is because he's in the process of making a B line to the organizing point of the whole Gospel, summarized in the last verse of today's text: "The time has come," he [Jesus] said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news" (v. 15). That is *the* announcement around which all Jesus' words and deeds revolve. As I mentioned earlier, the kingdom of God or reign of God is the Bible's way of referring to how God, in Jesus, comes to save us and to put right all that is wrong in this world. That's what God accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. That's the new reality that every baptized believer is sent to practice and proclaim.

But that won't happen easily, or without resistance. As Mark reminds us, after Jesus towed off, there was no potluck being served on the banks of the Jordan. Once we're finished with today's service, we'll get sent to the fellowship hall. But Jesus got sent to the wilderness. We'll be treated to dessert. Jesus got treated to the desert. What awaits us is feasting. What awaited Jesus was fasting, and temptation. Satan got an opportunity to put Jesus' identity and purpose to the test. Our own Lord, who has just heard the Father say to him, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased," now engages in struggle with the devil, whose design is to raise questions about Jesus' Sonship and to offer him more attractive alternatives than the way of the cross.

As with the Son of God, so with those who identify themselves with him and become children of God. Baptism isn't a ticket to the blessed life. Baptism is an assignment to a cross-shaped life. A life of costly self-surrender and self-emptying for the sake of Christ and the gospel.

Pastor Jim Denison says that while he was in college, he served as a missionary in East Malaysia. While there he attended a small church. At one of the church's worship services, a young girl came forward to announce her decision to follow Christ and be baptized. During the service, Denison noticed some worn-out luggage leaning against the wall of the church, so he asked the pastor about it. The pastor pointed to the young girl who had just been baptized and told Denison, "Her father said that if she was baptized as a Christian she could never go home again. So she brought her luggage."<sup>2</sup>

Bethany didn't have to bring any luggage with her today. She has my and Debby's affirmation, blessing, and support in her decision to follow Jesus. But as we see in this story, that's not the case for many people who commit their lives to Christ. And yet, the

good news is that whether or not you have the backing of your earthly parents in your decision to follow Jesus, you always have the promise of God's parental love. That's a promise you need to hear and claim on a regular basis, no matter whether you're the girl in the story, or Bethany, or any of us who commit our lives to Christ. The truth is, for all believers, the route remains the same: Out of the water and into the wilderness. Your identity as a child of God, a member of the family of God, will be put to the test.

Each day, you're called to take your identity as God's child and carry it into the various contexts of your life. Your home. Your family. Your workplace. Your school. Your friendships. Your neighborhood. Your congregation, and so on. And in all these places and spaces there will be challenges to following Christ and practicing the kingdom of God. There will be voices calling you to walk some path other than the path of Jesus. Voices telling you that you're primarily a consumer. Voices telling you that you're primarily a collection of personal data. Voices telling you that you're primarily a Republican or a Democrat, that you belong to a red state or a blue state. Voices telling you that you're just a cog in the machine or a number in the system. Voices telling you that you're not young enough or attractive enough or healthy enough. Voices telling you that who you are is primarily a matter of your income, your education, or your address. Voices telling you that you are your own, that you belong to yourself. Whenever and wherever and however the tests come, remember your baptism, and stay tuned in to the voice from heaven that says, "You are my child. I've loved you and claimed you and forgiven you through the Son. You belong to me. You have my Spirit in you. You are sent by me."

Baptism signifies repentance and faith. That's one of the reasons why, as we stand together in the water, I ask the baptismal candidate, "Do you turn away from sin, renounce evil, and intend to follow Christ?" That's not only a good question to mark the beginning of someone's new life in Christ. It's also a good question to put to ourselves each day as we seek to become more like Christ. And one of the ways you answer that question each day is by the way you turn away from voices that want to give you names and identities other than who you are in Christ.

There's a story told about the great Rabbi Aqiba who, on a foggy night, was walking home to his village in Galilee. Because of the darkness and fog, he misses the turn to his village and ends up going down a road that leads to a Roman garrison full of soldiers. As he approaches the fortress, he hears a voice shout over the wall, "Who are you and why are you here?" Aqiba paused, and then asked the soldier, "How much are they paying you?" "No," answered the soldier, "I said, who are you and what are you doing here?" Again Aqiba asked, "How much are they paying you?" "Uh, two denarius a day," said the soldier. And the rabbi answered, "I will give you twice that to come to my house every morning and ask me those two questions."

Who are you and why are you here? The answer to those questions begins by knowing who Jesus is and why he is here. He has come to save and to restore. When you come to faith in him, and publicly identify yourself with him through baptism, you're announcing the reality of God's kingdom, and calling others to repent and believe the good news.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary De Guzman, *Today's Christian Woman*, "Heart to Heart."

<sup>2</sup> Raymond McHenry, *Stories for the Soul* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001) 48.