

The sign on the used car lot read:

EVERYONE IS APPROVED

What a relief
What comfort

As I realized that
In spite of my deep
Disapproval of myself
My life, my day,
I am approved.

All the fellow travelers
Visitors for the week end
Workers climbing poles
Roadside vendors,
All are approved.

The gorgeous radiant trees
Leaves burning with light
Politicians' loud signs
Real blue water,
Everyone is approved.

Yes, I got it.

EVERYONE IS APPROVED.” -Sr. Bette Edl

That poem is by Sr. Bette Edl, one of my nun-friends in the Association of Contemplative Sisters, and for me, it speaks to this day that in some traditions is celebrated as the Feast of the Baptism...

The readings give us essentially a contrast between *two* baptisms: the baptism of John, and the baptism of Jesus.

John “appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,” we are told. And in the first reading, we hear that Paul runs into some disciples – who report that they had been baptized with John’s baptism – that is, with the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And when Paul asks them if they received the Holy Spirit, they say, “We didn’t even know there *was* a Spirit!” - They had received John’s baptism – that is, they had – as we hear in the Gospel – received a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. They had brought with them their *past*, and had committed themselves to repentance – to changing their lives.

To see how this is different from the baptism of Jesus, let’s look at the gospel again. Jesus shows up for John’s baptism, and when he emerges from the water, the Spirit indeed shows up – the Spirit is *present*. Jesus was baptized with the baptism of John – but Jesus hears the voice saying, “Here is my Beloved...” It’s not John’s baptism that brings this about, that causes this. It’s the affirmation of who Jesus knows he is: Beloved. And the Spirit is present.

We have spent the past six weeks preparing for and then relishing the mystery at the heart of our faith – the Incarnation – our belief that God took flesh, that God is not outside creation, but that God *entered* creation. We are told in the reading from Genesis that Light – and all of creation – was spoken by God. In John’s gospel, we hear, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, and the Word took flesh and dwelt among us.”

If we needed a clear presentation of the impact, the meaning, of the Incarnation in our lives, it is laid out for us in today’s pairing of these two baptisms – John’s baptism for repentance and the baptism of Jesus. For John’s baptism of repentance concerned itself with what people had done, with transgressions against the law, with forgiveness of sins, with the message to change their lives. The baptism of Jesus, though, gives us a new focus – the new covenant, if you will. It is not about violations of the law and atonement. No, the baptism of Jesus gives us the meaning of the Incarnation. It is about *relationship* and about who we are.

John's baptism, that of repentance and forgiveness of sins – only goes so far. It is about where we have come from, perhaps. It is about our initial 'stepping up the plate' – to say, to acknowledge we're not whole... It concerns what we have done, and what we hope to do differently, perhaps. But Jesus's baptism is about *who we are*.

Jesus' baptism brings us the rest of the story. The concern, the focus on sinfulness is past. The focus now is on the voice that is speaking the truth of the Spirit's presence: We are Beloved. We are born of water and the Spirit – we are indeed children of God.

This morning's Gospel is essentially the *beginning* of Mark's gospel. We heard the passage that comes immediately *before* today's reading on the 2nd Sunday of Advent – that season preparing us for the celebration of the Incarnation.

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,

who will prepare your way;

the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

`Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight,"

And it ends with the verse that begins our gospel reading today:

"John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

By bringing us again to this beginning of Mark's gospel, the church is giving us the next step after our affirmation of the Incarnation. There is no infancy narrative in Mark, no birth or angelic choirs. What we have in today's reading is Jesus' first appearance in Mark. This *is* Mark's explanation of the Incarnation. Mark cuts right to the chase, right to the implication of our belief in Incarnation - the voice that says: Here is my Beloved.

John's baptism did not make something happen. Rather, we see manifested what was already true: Jesus is of God. The Spirit is upon him. He is Beloved. And if we had ears to hear, *we* would hear the same voice from God with the same message for us – and for each person we witness baptized at the font in this church. *We* are of God. The Spirit is upon *us*. *We* are beloved. This is the baptism into which we *all* are baptized.

The focus is not on where or what we have been. For Mark, it doesn't matter where or how Jesus was born. What is of import is that the Spirit is upon us, and we are Beloved. That is what the baptism of Jesus is about.

And we are faithful to our baptismal covenant, as we prayed to be in the opening Collect, when we acknowledge the truth: that we are of God, and that we are beloved. When we really *get* that, then we experience a tremendous relief and freedom – the freedom to proclaim what know: the Good News that the Kingdom of God, the reign of God, the Presence of God is here and now. And Everyone is Approved.

It is so. Amen.

Acts 19:1-7

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism." Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied--altogether there were about twelve of them.

Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."