

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
January 11, 2009
Baptism of the Lord Sunday
Mark 1:1-14

Just Plain Ordinary....Right?

I was baptized at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Ft Worth. My sister, Shalyn, was baptized at the same time. She was a baby, squirming in my mother's arms. I was four years old, trying to act like I was eight. We were the first baptisms that my father administered, since he had just transferred his ordination into the Presbyterian Church. I only remember one thing about the day of my baptism. I remember wondering about the water.

As a matter of fact, as soon as my father put the water on my head, I reached my own little hand up there to feel it. Maybe it would feel differently than the normal water that was used to wash my hair each night. Nope. It felt the same. So I then put my newly wet hand in front of nose and breathed in deeply. Surely the baptismal waters would smell differently than "normal" water, right? Nope. It smelled the same too.

But even as an adult, I completely understand why I wanted to examine the water on that day. Clearly, my parents and I had talked a lot about the baptism. I am certain that both of my parents told me that it would be a very special moment for me and for Shalyn. They probably told me that it would be a holy moment. Perhaps they mentioned that it would be the time when God's signature on me as one of God's children would be highlighted and announced. All these years later, I do not remember exactly what they told me in preparation for my baptism. I just remember knowing it was something special.

So naturally, I assumed the water would be something special too. That is why I had to check it out, examine it, try and capture some of its mystery with my little hand and my little nose. Now, I don't remember being disappointed in its ordinariness, but I imagine I was, even if it were just a little. Maybe I was distracted by Shalyn's cries as Dad then baptized her. But I bet that even as a child, I was a little disappointed that the baptismal water still felt and smelled like ordinary water. And maybe I was even a little disappointed that after my baptism, the world still felt and smelled like the ordinary world; I still felt and smelled like ordinary 4 year old Shannon; it seemed that nothing had really changed.

John the Baptist had to feel more than a bit disappointed on that day at the Jordan. He had spent so much time out in the wilderness getting things ready for the Messiah—the one who was to come. He had poured out his heart-- preaching and teaching, preparing the way, being the voice crying out to make all the paths straight. He had taken on the clothing and habits of the prophet Elijah. And the people had responded to his message. They were coming out in droves to repent of their sins, to turn from who they had been, in order to turn to who God was calling them to be. And then, after hearing John's preaching and doing their repenting, they would wade out in the waters, the ordinary Jordan waters, to be baptized by John.

And after their baptisms, John would say "You think this is incredible? Just wait! You ain't seen nothing yet. The one who is coming after me is far more powerful. I am not even worthy

to untie his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. Just wait. There will be nothing ordinary about the one for whom we are waiting.”

Everybody out there who heard John’s words must have been buzzing with excitement. Just what would this powerful one be like? What would he look like? What would he say when he arrived? They had their tradition helping to fill in the blanks—their tradition that the Messiah would arrive in royal fashion—riding in triumphantly on horseback, ready to take on the Romans with a single blow. I am sure that John and the people were prepared for something absolutely extraordinary to happen, someone absolutely extraordinary to happen.

And then, Jesus. As one commentator writes, “Having thus created a mood of dramatic expectancy, Mark described the entrance of Jesus in the most shockingly anticlimactic fashion conceivable.” True. John sets us all up for this ARRIVAL and Jesus just wanders on up with the rest of the bunch.

No trumpets. No horse. Not even a “Hey cousin, I’m here.” Jesus came from Nazareth from Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. It sounds extremely ordinary, doesn’t it? Jesus walks up and stands in line with everybody else—all the mothers with kids clinging to their legs; all the fathers whose robes were grimy with the day’s work. Jesus stands shoulder to shoulder with those for whom confession would only take a few minutes, tops; as well as with those who might as well camp out given all the things they needed to get off their chest in order to begin again. The saints and the sinners and Jesus. All standing shoulder to shoulder, waiting in line for their turn to be put down into the very ordinary waters of the Jordan.

Mark, unlike Matthew, does not report any conversation between John and Jesus on that day. It is as if Mark was trying to go out of his way to prove just how ordinary the whole thing appeared—no special arrival, no special conversation, no special waters just for Jesus. Jesus was baptized in the Jordan just like the people in line before him and just like the people in line behind him. Jesus went down into the same murky waters to signal cleansing and forgiveness just like all the rest of the crowd, just like me and my sister Shay, just like you have or will do one day.

Mark goes out of his way to show us the complete identification of Jesus with the rest of us saints and sinners. For this moment is Mark’s nativity story. It is his proclamation of incarnation: The proclamation that God in Jesus was taking our side, not content to be separate from us, but desiring to join us, to be one with us in all that we are and in all that we do. So here at the river’s edge, we see what appears to be Jesus’ special yet ordinary baptismal moment. Well, sort of ordinary.

Jesus might have walked up just like everybody else, stood in line just like everybody else, went into the waters just like everybody else, but then, something happened to him that had not happened to anyone else. Mark writes that as Jesus was coming up out of the water God ripped open, tore open the heavens, and sent the very Spirit of God, the very power of God, down into Jesus to grab him, inhabit him, and possess him.

The verb Mark uses to describe God's action—schitzo—has a very specific meaning. It means to tear, to rip, to rend. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke use the much tamer verb “to open” to describe what God is doing. According to Matthew and Luke, “the heavens are opened” at the moment of Jesus' baptism.

That does not quite do it for Mark. As Mark reports it, the heavens were not just opened, like one can open and close a door, but rather, they were torn apart, ripped, and therefore, never able to be put back together in the same way again. Schitzo is the same verb used in Isaiah's Advent cry for God to hurry it on up, come down and get to work. “Oh that you would tear the heavens open and come down,” Isaiah pleaded.

By using the same verb, Mark is claiming that in Jesus, that is exactly what God is doing. In Jesus, God **is tearing open** the heavens and coming down. In Jesus, God **is tearing open** the boundaries that separated the earthly realm from the heavenly realm. In Jesus, God **is tearing open** the boundaries that separated human brokenness from heavenly wholeness.

It is as if God had been very slowly tearing, tearing, tearing, carefully, methodically, tearing apart the boundary between creature and Creator, from the very moment Mary said “Yes” to God's forming of Jesus in her womb. Jesus grows in Mary's womb. Tear, tear, tear. Jesus is born a human birth. Tear, tear, tear. Jesus is circumcised and raised in the Jewish faith. Tear, tear, tear. Jesus probably skins his knees and cries tears of anger and has bad dreams. Tear, tear, tear. Jesus grows in stature and in wisdom. Tear, tear, tear. Jesus feels called to go to the river Jordan, to stand in line with all the others, and to get baptized by his cousin John. Tear, tear, tear.

It is as if the decision of incarnation had set God slowly but surely on the path of ripping apart everything that we assumed separated us from God. Slowly, slowly tearing. Carefully, subtly, nothing too attention-getting, yet. **But then**, at this moment of baptism, at this moment of call, at this moment of Jesus' ordination, God decides to let it all rip and completely tears open, once and for all, schitzo, the boundary between humanity and divinity.

And on the wings of the Spirit, God rushes down to take full hold of God's Beloved, Jesus, God's Love Made Flesh, possessing him, driving him, calling him, birthing him into his full mission of being Emmanuel. Leaving the tattered fabric of heaven to flap in the wind, never to be put back together, mended, in the same way again.

“You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” The voice must have rung in Jesus' ears as he stood there, water dripping down his nose, his hands trying to clear it from his eyes. You wonder if Jesus might have looked around at that moment, just to see if anyone else had heard what he had heard. Just to see if anyone else had seen what he had seen—something like a dove rushing down and entering into his very being.

But, according to Mark, Jesus was the only one who knew what had just happened. Everyone else just saw John's cousin walk out into the river, go down in the ordinary waters, and come up. Jesus was the only one who heard the voice. Jesus was the only one who saw the heavens ripped

apart totally and permanently. And, according to Scripture, Jesus knew from that moment on, who and whose he was and what that meant not just for him, but for all of creation.

It is interesting, isn't it. It appeared to be such an ordinary thing—the crowds, the water, the baptismal moment. It appeared to be a special, yet unremarkable moment, in Jesus' life. And yet, it turns out that it was one of **the** most remarkable moments in our history as a people, as God's people. For in Mark's Gospel, it was **the** moment when God announced once and for all that nothing would be able ever separate us again from the one who created us, who gave us life. God would no longer tolerate a separation of God from God's people. In Jesus, we have full access to God. AND, God has full access to us.

But it had appeared to be such an ordinary thing—the crowds, the water, that baptismal moment. Certainly special, but unremarkable, right?

I don't think so. I think it was both special and amazingly remarkable. And I'm not just talking about Jesus' baptism, either. My four year old self may not have felt or smelled anything different in the baptismal water that day at Westminster Presbyterian Church, but it was not an ordinary moment. My baby sister may have only felt cold liquid placed on her head, startling her and making her cry, but it was not an ordinary moment. My fathers' hands may have just scooped up Ft Worth tap water that an elder had poured into that font early that morning, but it was not an ordinary moment. Because of that day in the river Jordan, my baptism, your baptism, was anything **but** ordinary.

Because of that day in the river Jordan, we believe that at the moment of baptism, the torn fabric of heaven is illuminated once again. At the moment of baptism, the power of God's rushing Spirit running loose in our world is proclaimed once again. At the moment of baptism, the promise that nothing, absolutely nothing, will ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord is announced for all to hear, once again.

And sisters and brothers, a celebration of that kind of incarnational, boundary-ripping, Spirit-rushing, wild divine love is anything **BUT** an ordinary moment. May we remember it and be thankful.

ⁱ Myers, Ched. Binding the Strong Man. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988.