

Mark 1:4-11  
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“What If You Were Next?”

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Some of you who enjoy wondering around on Youtube may have encountered sassy 7-year-old Ava Ryan. Her humorous videos have been racking up millions of views. Ava has created funny scenes by imagining her hot mess friend, Charlene, or her imaginary Bossy Boss lady who wishes she was on a cruise all the time. In one video Ava pretends she is on the phone with a friend and has been working very hard, telling her friend, “I’ve been working for 3 hours,” then she leans away, covers the phone and says to the camera, “Actually I spent three hours looking at baby goats.” In the first video I saw Ava was also on the phone and said, “I’m feeling really good about myself tonight so I’m just gonna have some water, refreshing...”

As we think about refreshing waters, I invite us to turn our attention to the baptism of Jesus. What if you... were next in line to be baptized after Jesus? Do you think you would have seen any clues that the person in front of you was special? Would you regret any of the topics you discussed, would you wish you had asked him some tougher questions? What would you be thinking from your front row seat as you watch John baptize the Savior of the world?

John had become a popular prophet; large crowds would come out from the city and countryside to hear him preach. After his sermons many would wade out into the river and be baptized, full immersion.

I realize the Church today has sort of “tidied” up the sacrament of baptism. We use a little font with a few ounces of tap water. I gently dip my hand in the water and leave a few drops on the top of the person’s head. The one being baptized often wears a beautiful white gown... It becomes a quaint ceremony which doesn’t give us much sense of the power, risk, or drama.

Years ago I got a taste of what baptism might have been like in Jesus’ day. In my first church a group of local pastors decided to reenact Jesus’ baptism during a combined worship service of our 5 congregations. They decided the new guy, me, would play Jesus and a pastor from the church hosting the service, Rev. Petie McLean, would be John. Rev. McLean’s church had a full baptismal tank. During the reenactment Rev. McLean climbed into her waiters walked into the big tank. I in a white baptismal robe followed. Rev. McLean warned me she was going to take me down hard, but as a former competition swimmer and lifeguard instructor I was pretty comfortable around water.

As I waded into the tank my robe filling with ice cold water... Rev. Petie McLean said the words, “I baptize you in the name of the... and she put one arm behind my neck and one hand vertical across my chest, and she kicked my feet out from under me as she pushed my head and body under the water.

Imagine being in the front row when Jesus was baptized this way; you might have felt fear as the sky is torn open, confusion as the Dove ascends, and then the Still Speaking God says, "This is my child. The Beloved."

That is baptism with Holy Spirit power, risk and drama. In baptism we are cleansed of sin. In baptism we are publicly named as a member of God's family, and given God's surname. That's why the Pastor says, "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." In Baptism we metaphorically die and rise with Christ Jesus and thereby establish the very rhythm for a life lived by faith. The life of faith will call us to repeatedly die to an old way of being, and become born as a new Creation in Christ. Trusting in this rhythm, trusting God... this doesn't come easily, but our baptism reminds us to who we are, to whom we belong, and how to live thankful lives.

Baptism calls us into a community in Christ, into God's family where we make friends, we find caring and support in tough times, and we have instant family to celebrate our milestones and successes with us. We find people who share core values. We find a family where water is thicker than blood. In the body of Christ, we find a community ready to assemble the gifts God has given into a completed, intergenerational puzzle where each person has a part to play as we reach out with God's powerful, saving love.

But the life of faith also requires courage. Jesus had to go against the status quo, he leaned on faith during fearful or sorrowful times, he needed strength to continue to serve and care for others, and skills and knowledge to build relationship with the poor, the ill, and the outcast. Baptism makes us part of a family of love and support, but also a family which calls us to the hard work of right-living and peacemaking, and that will not always be easy.

So what if you were the next person in Line. Once you got past the fear, the confusion, the amazement of being front row at Jesus' baptism. As it became your turn to come forward what would you be thinking?

As you begin to push your thighs through the flowing water wading toward the two men, would you wonder... Should I ask Jesus to baptize me now? Should I make a speech to the crowd? Should I wait for Jesus or John to make a speech? Then, you see Jesus move on and John signals to you. You waded out keenly aware you are being immersed in the same water, the same spirit as the Messiah.

At that moment it hits you... I am deliberately choosing God as Lord of my life. I am deliberately choosing Jesus as my Savior and brother. I am deliberately choosing to follow the leadings of the Holy Spirit both when it makes life easier, and when doing Justice and loving kindness makes following God's Spirit much more challenging.

When all of us were baptized there were vows spoken and received. As an infant your parents and godparents took the vows for you, as an older child or adult you accepted these vows yourself. They are the same vows spoken in the rite of confirmation or when a person

joins a UCC congregation... We rise before God and the gathered community and we proclaim we will be an active participant in the family of God. We will renounce evil and seek the new life Christ offers. We will claim Jesus as Lord and Savior. We will follow Christ, resist oppression and evil, show love and justice, and witness to the word and work of Christ. And finally, We vow to grow in faith through worship, sharing in the sacrament, and participating in the education and service of the Church.

As John puts his arm behind your head, and his other arm across your chest, and kicks your feet out, Baptism becomes a fundamentally life-orienting experience where we enter into God's loving community and offer that to the world around us.

Amen