

Chris Currie  
Text: Mark 1:4-11  
Sermon: So That Is That  
January 7, 2024  
Baptism of the Lord

Mark 1:4-11

<sup>4</sup> so John the baptizer appeared<sup>[a]</sup> in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> And the whole Judean region and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup> Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. <sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with<sup>[b]</sup> water, but he will baptize you with<sup>[c]</sup> the Holy Spirit."

<sup>9</sup> In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my Son, the Beloved;<sup>[d]</sup> with you I am well pleased."

Too bad there is no 13<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas...if there were, it would be today, and if there were, WH Auden's powerful poem 'So That is That,' from his larger A Christmas Oratorio would be particularly apt. So if you can relate, here is what Auden has to say about today: 'Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree, putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes—some have got broken—and carrying them up into the attic. The holly and mistletoe must be taken down and burnt, and the children got ready for school. These are enough left overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week—not that we have such an appetite, having drunk such a lot, stayed up so late, attempted-quite unsuccessfully-to love all our relatives, and in general grossly overestimated our powers.' Auden continues: 'Once again as in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed to do more than entertain it as an agreeable Possibility. Once again we have sent Him away, begging though to remain His disobedient servant, the promising child who cannot keep His word for long. The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory, and already the mind begins to vaguely be aware of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now be very far off. But,' he reminds us, 'for the time being, here we all here...'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> W.H. Auden, 'Well, so that is that,' in *The Oxford Book of Christmas Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 142.

Now, I realize, for everyone else in the world, the time being (after Christmas is a dreaded time between the hopes of Christ's coming and the poignant events of Christ's passion and the inexplicable and fearful event of Christ's resurrection.) Every where else in the world is entering a grey period, what a colleague in ministry used to call the January and February blues. But we live in New Orleans; here it is not so bad...we still have our green and purple and gold to carry us through. But even with the king cake and prospect of Fat Tuesday feasting before Lenten fasting ahead of us, we arrive here not quite ready to bid Christmas a full farewell. O at least I do. It doesn't seem that long ago that John the Baptist was shaking our foundations and preparing the way of the Lord. And already here he is back again, all over again, almost exactly where he was at Advent, with his locusts and wild honey and wilderness aesthetic calling all to renewal. Perhaps that is another image of John the Baptist; the revival preacher, the tent preacher out on the frontier, the camp meeting revivalist, calling everyone to repentance, renewal, a more authentic way of life. Back to the grind.

But if Christmas just happened, if the Word has become flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth, if Jesus is God with our skin on, so to speak, why does he need renewal, why does he need baptism and forgiveness, why does he need repentance, to be made pure and whole once again? Did Christmas not work completely? Is he hedging his bets? Is he wearing a leather belt like John but also suspenders, too, just making sure he has both entered the world as divinity in human form but also gone through all the necessary ritual cleansing too? The Scottish theologian James Torrance tells the story of being in California for a term as visiting professor and walking along the beach and running into a desperate soul who needed divine intervention. He had been married to his wife for 45 years but she had just received a cancer diagnosis and she needed immediate surgery. He admitted: 'I have been walking the streets at night, desperate, because I do not know how to face the future without my spouse –and without faith.' He went on. 'My father was a Presbyterian minister, and I was brought up in a godly home. But I have drifted away from the church...I wish I had faith. I have been walking up and down the beach trying to pray, but I can't.'<sup>2</sup>

Torrance pondered what to say to him. Should he show him the secret formula? Tell him how to get faith and how to pray? Give him the right technique and the right playbook for what he needed to do? No, instead, he said this: 'In Jesus Christ we have someone who knows all about this. He has been through it all—through suffering and death and separation—and he will carry you both through it into resurrection life. He has [already]

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<sup>2</sup> James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace* (Downer's Grove, IL, IVP Academic, 1996), 43-45.

heard your cry for faith and is answering. You have been walking up and down this beach, wanting to pray, trying to pray, but not knowing how to pray. In Jesus Christ we have someone who is praying for you. He has heard your groans and is [already] interceding for you and with you and in you.'

He then showed him in Luke where Jesus tells Simon Peter that he is praying for him that his faith may not fail even before Peter denies him. He showed him in Romans chapter 8, v. 26 Paul's words that the Spirit intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.' And so he prayed with him and then with him and his wife, that they may be assured that Christ's prays and intercedes for us, even before we open our mouths and know what to say before God. He did not take him out in the wilderness, to repent, to start over, to rededicate his life, to cleanse and renew and purify again. Rather, he pointed him to the reality that Jesus Christ is already praying for us, interceding for us, standing in our place in our struggle, in our sorrow, in our failures to keep the faith, and there he is praying, but also inviting us to join in his prayer, there he is in our sorrow, but giving us a glimpse that we are not alone, there he is in our failures to keep the faith, not wagging I told you so finger or making us go through the ministrations of repentance, remorse, and atonement, but inviting us to stand in his gospel of grace, to trust in Christ's faith and not the power or failure of our own, to be drawn into Christ's prayers for us.

If you were to ask why Jesus needed to be baptized, this is the best answer I could give...he went to be baptized on our behalf. He did so, not out of his own need for renewal, not because he sought repentance, not because he needed forgiveness or needed atonement, but out of a desire to live a life in complete solidarity with humanity. Jesus goes out into the wilderness with that mass of humanity seeking renewal, so that he would be fully joined to us and baptized into our humanity, not just baptized into our mountaintops or our best days, but to be joined to us in our deepest needs, our hardest struggles, our worst moments, and our greatest fears. So he could pray for us. So he could stand before God on our behalf so we never have to by ourselves. So he live a life before God in full solidarity with us.

We began with the poetry of Wystan Hugh Auden, a disheveled and struggling soul who also happened to be a brilliant poet and theologian too. In an article about his Christmas Oratorio, writer Peter Steinfelds has this to say about Auden: 'someone once said of the perpetually disheveled Auden that 'everything he touched turned to cigarette ashes.' But Steinfelds is quick to remind us that with Auden the opposite was also true, that Auden turned a lot of tattered papers and cigarette ashes into astoundingly beautiful and touching poetry, 'transforming

everyday idioms, simple meters, and rollicking jingles into profound and haunting stanzas.' In particular Steinfels points to the poem we heard earlier from 'For the Time Being,' where Auden brought his gifts to 'the Christmas theme of the Incarnation, God's taking on the humblest forms, power, and vulnerability, fused to the sacredness of the mundane.'<sup>3</sup> Everything he touched turned to ashes, but he could take ashes and old and mundane paper and render it all into something beautiful and exquisite.

There is nothing more mundane than the 13<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas no matter how well our 12<sup>th</sup> night reverie tries to pretty it up. The Jesus who goes to get baptized is no king cake baby. He is all grown up, traveling with the hordes of humanity, not to fix them, not to go in front of them, not to push John to the side and take over for him, but this Jesus walks alongside of them, accompanies them, lives in solidarity with them, almost unrecognizably so, and even gets baptized with them. In many ways, he is completely indistinct from any of them. He doesn't look all that different from them or behave different from them or pretend he is in any way superior or transcendent to them.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas, God does not stop becoming human. In fact, as we see here in the baptism of Jesus, the very exact opposite takes place. God keeps becoming human, even more so, entering more deeply into our lives, living more completely in solidarity with us, absorbing more fully all that troubles us, confronting demons, speaking to unclean spirits, calling disciples, looking into every human life no matter how unlovely, how marginal, how damaged or impaired, and sometimes by just a look or a touch on the garment or a sideways glance, freeing and empowering each life to rejoice, to flourish before God, to love those in their midst, and to share the life they found with others.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas, Jesus gets baptized. Not because he needs to; not because forgiveness of his sins was a prerequisite before he could do anything else; not because he needed to repent and be made clean. Jesus gets baptized to become one of us and one with us, to get closer to us, to live in solidarity with us. The incarnation did not conclude on Christmas Eve, but continues until our humanity is completely free, completely unburdened, flourishing, and continually stunned to see just how far God will go to become one of us, to enter into the spectacular of our world but also to enter into the dull and the mundane, to embrace every jot and tittle of our humanity. That is what Jesus got baptized into--

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Steinfels, 'Beliefs,' December 22, 1990.