

January 4, 2009
First Sunday after Epiphany
Mark 1:4-11

Jesus Calls us to be SOIFing!

The basis for today's teaching is from Chapter 1 of Mark's Gospel, Verses 4-11. It is Mark's account of the Baptism of Jesus and is as follows:

4 John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. 5 Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.

6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair and with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 And he preached, saying, "There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose. 8 I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

9 It came to pass in those days *that* Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And immediately, coming up from the water, He saw the heavens parting and the Spirit

descending upon Him like a dove. 11 Then a voice came from heaven, “You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” (NKJV)

John was in the Wilderness – Yet all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him in the wilderness.

It is pretty evident that John remained in the wilderness. He didn't go into town and ride around in a chariot announcing, “Y'all come.” He simply came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

Doesn't it strike you kind of odd that this person, garbed in camel's air with a leather belt around his waist, who ate nothing but locusts and wild honey, and simply went about baptizing and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins would have people from 30 miles WALK out into the wilderness to see and hear him? And it wasn't just a small handful, it was all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem.

I want to come back to this point, but first I want to explore some of the nuances that are held in this account of John The Baptist and the Baptism of Jesus.

The word that is translated “repentance” is the Greek word “metanoia.” We tend to think of repentance as feeling guilty about our sins, but it is more -- much more.

The Greek word, metanoia, embraces the idea of a change of mind and direction. It’s like the guy who was building a house and couldn’t understand why it took so many nails. He was talking about it to a friend who came over to see if he could help out. So the guy brought him over, and he started to nail plywood to the wall, but every second or third nail he would toss to the floor. When his friend asked him why he was dropping the nails on the floor, he replied, “those nails are facing the wrong way and are for the opposite wall.”

When we learn a new or better way of doing something or of thinking, we generally change our

behavior to match our new and improved understanding.

Guilt may enter into our “metanoia,” our repentance; often when we come to our new understanding we realize that our past behavior harmed others, and there may be feelings of remorse and guilt, but that remorse or guilt becomes true repentance **ONLY** when it causes us to change our mind and our direction. Guilt alone **DOES NOT** constitute repentance.

Mark writes that John was preaching, “a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.” This simple statement provides us with the three elements that are related to our salvation; repentance, baptism, and forgiveness. Repentance motivates us to seek baptism; repentance and baptism together prepare us to receive forgiveness of our sins; forgiveness of sins leads to our salvation.

But what got all the land or the people of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, to go out to him?

Why would anyone leave the comfort of the city and make the trek into the wilderness braving the heat, exposing themselves to deadly spiders, snakes, and scorpions? What motivated them?

We might conjecture that there was a natural inquisitiveness to go see this prophet, after all there hadn't been a prophet in Israel for over three hundred years, and many had to be curious.

But could simple curiosity motivate you to venture into the wilderness in the heat of the day? Mind you that most would have to walk the distance, they didn't public transportation, much less cars they could hop in and ride in air conditioned comfort. It would take making a serious commitment and a significant effort to go hear this preaching prophet.

If it wasn't curiosity, perhaps it was the message, John preached, "There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose. I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

This must surely confound those who came to see and hear John. They no sooner arrive than John redirects them to another who comes after him, one who is “mightier.”

This is no small claim when one considers the obvious charisma of John. There has been no prophet for nearly four centuries, no one who speaks prophetically with authority and power... no living person has seen anything this prophetically powerful, yet John tells them that his power is nothing compared to the power of the one to come

John says, of this mightier one, I am not worthy to stoop down and loose his sandal strap.

This has only minor significance in our understanding so to put it into the context of the time, we need to appreciate that this is a major and significant comparison. The loosening of someone’s sandal strap was considered so demeaning and menial that even slaves were exempted from doing it.

And so what John is saying is that the societal distance between himself and the one who is to

come is greater than that between master and slave. And as John is a powerful prophet, the point that John is making is that it is not his own insignificance that is important, rather it is the one to come, Jesus' overwhelming significance.

John continues with, "I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." This is surely an exciting prophecy. The people have only their scripture to attest to the witness of the prophets. They have languished for centuries without prophets and without the Spirit of God working actively in their presence. And John prophesies that the one to come will baptize, that is Jesus will fully immerse, overwhelm, or submerge them in the Holy Spirit. A truly exciting prospect, it would be as if one had been in the desert for two days without water and then was submersed in a pool of water. For a spiritually parched nation, this is good news indeed.

And in Mark's report, we move from being told of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit to... "and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove. 11 Then a voice

came from heaven, “You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

John proclaimed it - God performed it.

This is the model that we each need to accept. Jesus calls us each to be His disciples, and in so being, He calls us to go into the world and make disciples of all nations. Often times we think that it is our responsibility to bring about the conversion. But the model of John the Baptist is that we are to proclaim the truth. It is not up to us to bring about conversion, that activity is totally in God’s hands.

We are to proclaim the Good News – and let God bring about the conviction.

We proclaim it – God performs it.

Which bring us back to our original question, what is it that motivated folks to journey into the wilderness to see and hear John the Baptist?

He didn’t advertise in the newspapers. He didn’t hire a public relations specialist. He didn’t plaster notices all over Judea and Jerusalem. What caused folks to come into the wilderness?

Word of mouth...the most powerful and meaningful form of communication.

Now let's see what might one say that would stir masses to trundle out into the wilderness?

“Did you hear about that crack pot out in the wilderness? He's a crazy man, wearing only camel skins secured by a belt and eating only locusts and honey. And the things that he says...they're off the wall.”

Or perhaps...

I went out to see that guy in the wilderness. He had a lot to say, and we stood for hours, and then he expected us to walk into the Jordan and get soaking wet just to receive a baptism of repentance. As if I needed that! I'm of Abraham's lineage, I need not be baptized. What a waste of time.

These certainly do not carry an inspirational message that would encourage me or anyone else to

venture out in the heat of the day to see this wild man in the wilderness.

But what if the message was;

I went out to see that prophet, John who is in the wilderness by the Jordan, and He spoke powerfully of the need to be prepared to receive the Messiah. He spoke of making straight paths and quoted the prophet Isaiah. His words spoke to my heart and I was drawn to receive the water baptism, a baptism of repentance. And I have recommitted my life to following the Word of God.

These words would ring true to the heart and touch the heart in ways that people were longing to hear. The message of John is needed as much today as it was in John's day; perhaps even more so. And although there may be TV and radio evangelists who will reach some, these media are not as warm and do not relate anywhere as effectively as one-on-one communication.

And so our challenge for this year is to SOIF.
Which brings me to the question, have you been
SOIFing?

You don't know what SOIFing is? S.O.I.F. –
Stepping Out In Faith. Have you been Stepping out
in faith.

Your neighbor, the lone man you see in the grocery
store, the single mother with youngsters struggling
to get her grocery shopping done, the folks you see
hanging around outside on Sunday morning
seemingly with no place to go. Each is an
opportunity for you to SOIF.

For through our Stepping Out in Faith, we become
the servant leaders that Jesus calls us to be. Jesus
calls us to be servants to those in need, to follow His
lead by living lives of service just as He did. That
service was not to the powerful and wealthy but to
the poor, the downtrodden, the widows and orphans.
Let us all dedicate our lives to serving Jesus by
serving those He would call to His righteousness.
And be not fearful of what you might say, for when
you are serving Him, He is with you and will give

you the words to say that will be an encouragement to those who need Him and whose hearts are seeking Him.

May our Lord quicken our hearts to SOIF everyday as we follow his lead as servant leaders. – Amen.