

Mark 1: 4-11

SOMETIMES, I WISH IT WERE HARDER TO JOIN THE CHURCH. THINK ABOUT IT, IT'S HARDER TO GET A MEMBERSHIP AT COSTCO THAN IT IS TO BECOME A CHRISTIAN. AND THAT'S A BAD THING. IT'S BAD, SPECIFICALLY, BECAUSE IF THE CHURCH IS EASY TO JOIN, THEN ANY NOTION OF THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF MEMBERSHIP CAN JUST FLY RIGHT OUT THE WINDOW.

SOMETIMES, TALKING ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE PART OF THE WHOLE CHRISTAIN EXPERIENCE CAN START TO SOUND LIKE THAT PART IN A CAR COMMERCIAL WHERE THE ANNOUNCER STARTS TALKING A THOUSAND MILES AN HOUR: "BAPTISM IS TERRIFIC BUT PLEASE PLAN ON TITHING, ATTENDING, AND EXPERIENCING REGULAR FRUSTRATION AND DISCOMFORT AS YOU ATTEMPT TO CHANGE YOUR LIFE. BE ADVISED THAT CHRITSMAS AND EASTER COME ONLY ONCE A YEAR RESPECITVELY.

WHO CAN BLAME PEOPLE FOR JUST TUNING THAT PART OUT?

AND SO, I CAN'T HELP BUT WISH THAT JOINING UP....SIGNING ON THE DOTTED LINE....WERE UNDERSTOOD TO BE A MUCH BIGGER COMMITMENT. MY PROFESSOR OF WORSHIP IN SEMINARY OFTEN TOLD THE STORY OF HIS HOME CHURCH HOW THE PASTOR REQUIRED NEW MEMBERS TO SERVE ON A COMMITTEE THE MINUTE THEY JOINED.

ALL OF THIS HAS ME THINKING ABOUT BAPTISM.

WHAT IF.....

WHAT IF INSTEAD OF A LITTLE SPRINKLING OF WATER ON THE FOREHEAD OF EVEN A FULL IMMERSION ON THE BANKS OF LAKE HENDRICKS OR SOMETHING IN BETWEEN...WHAT IF THE ONLY WAY TO JOIN THE CHURCH WAS BY SKYDIVING?

THE VERY IDEA MAKES MY STOMACH DO BACKFLIPS. BUT THINK ABOUT IT. FREE FALL, THEN THE RIP CORD, AND THEN A GENTLY FLOATING DOWN TO THE GROUND. WHAT'S NOT THEOLOGICAL ABOUT THAT?

BECAUSE WHAT ARE THE REALITY OF SIN AND REDEMPTION AND THE DANGEROUS THRILL OF FALLING AND THE GREAT GIFT OF SALVATION AND THE RECOGNITION THAT OUR LIVES ARE NOT REALLY IN OUR OWN HANDS, IF THEY AREN'T LIKE SKYDIVING?

WORK WITH ME HERE....IMAGINE WHAT IT WOULD MEAN TO GO THROUGH THAT EXPERIENCE, WITH ITS TERRORS AND ITS RUSHES AND ITS ULTIMATE RELIEF...AND THEN SHOW UP AT CHURCH ON SUNDAY TO BE GREETED BY A ROOM FULL OF PEOPLE WHO HAD BEEN THROUGH ALL OF THAT, TOO?

THINK HOW YOU WOULD SEE THEM ALL, AS YOU WALKED IN AND FOUND YOUR PEW. THINK HOW YOU WOULD SEE THEM ALL, THE CREAKY, THE BUSY, THE YOUNG AND THE OLD, THE

HAPPY AND THE SAD...THINK HOW YOU WOULD SEE THEM ALL, IF BEING BAPTIZED MEANT THAT AT SOME POINT, HOWEVER MANY YEARS BEFORE, THEY HAD EACH HAD THAT DAY--- THAT DAY WHEN THEY HAD SOMEHOW SUMMONED ENOUGH COURAGE TO LEAP OUT INTO THIN AIR AND INTO THE HANDS OF GOD...

THINK ABOUT IT. THINK ABOUT IT, BECAUSE WHEN MARK'S GOSPEL DESCRIBES THE BAPTISM OF JESUS, IT'S THAT KIND OF RADICAL ACT THAT HE SEEMS TO HAVE IN MIND. MARK WRITES THAT AS JESUS "WAS COMING OUT OF THE WATER, HE SAW THE HEAVENS TORN APART AND A DOVE DESCENDING." HIS WORD FOR 'TORN APART' IS *SCHIZO*, AND IT MEANS "TO CLEAVE, TO CLEAVE ASUNDER, TO REND." IT'S A STRANGELY VIOLENT WORD TO DESCRIBE SUCH A HAPPY OCCASION.

IF I ASKED YOU TO DESCRIBE THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM, WHAT ADJECTIVES WOULD YOU CHOOSE? BEAUTIFUL? SOLEMN? HOLY? WOULD ANY OF YOU USE THE WORD "WILD?" AS IN: BAPTISM IS ONE OF THE WILDEST THINGS CHRISTIANS DO? HAS IT EVER OCCURRED TO YOUR THAT THIS WATERY, TWO-THOUSAND-YEAR-OLD RITUAL OF THE CHURCH IS INDEED WILD?

ON THIS FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, SCRIPTURE INVITES US TO WITNESS JESUS'S BAPTISM, AND REFLECT ON OUR OWN. BUT THE LANGUAGE OF MARK IS NOT THE LANGUAGE OF CHURCHY DECORUM. IT'S LANGUAGE OF THE UNTAMED AND THE UNPREDICTABLE.

THE WAY WE TALK ABOUT BAPTISM, IT WOULD HAVE MADE MORE SENSE IF MARK HAD TALKED ABOUT THE DOVE, GENTLY COOING, OR PERHAPS FLUTTERING OVER THE SURFACE OF THE WATER. BUT THAT IS NOT HOW HE TALKS ABOUT IT.

INSTEAD, MARK TALKS ABOUT THE HEAVENS BEING TORN APART. IT'S THE WORD MATTHEW, MARK AND LUKE ALL USE TO DESCRIBE THAT MOMENT ON GOOD FRIDAY WHEN THE CURTAIN OF THE TEMPLE IS TORN IN TWO. IT'S THE WORD JOHN USES WHEN THE ROMAN SOLDIERS AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS DETERMINE NOT TO TEAR JESUS' GARMENT AND DIVIDE IT BETWEEN THEM, BUT TO CAST LOTS FOR IT, INSTEAD. IT'S A WORD SIMILAR TO THE PROPHECIES OF ISAIAH, ALSO, PARTICULARLY WHEN ISAIAH SAYS TO GOD, "O THAT YOU WOULD TEAR OPEN THE HEAVENS AND COME DOWN."

MARK UNDERSTANDS VERY CLEARLY THAT IN JESUS, THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT HAS HAPPENED. GOD HAS TORN APART THE HEAVENS AND COME DOWN. THIS IS MARK'S CHRISTMAS STORY. AND THIS IS WHY, IN MARK'S JUDGMENT, THE BAPTISM OF JESUS IS SO VERY CLEARLY A RADICAL ACT. IN JESUS, GOD HAS COMMITTED THE ACT OF BREAKING AND ENTERING THE WORLD, AND MARK WANTS THE WORLD TO KNOW.

AND YET...HOW MUCH OF GOD'S ACTIVE INTEREST IN US ARE WE REALLY PREPARED TO ADMIT? BECAUSE SERIOUSLY, IF WE TOOK OUR BAPTISMS SERIOUSLY, THEY MIGHT JUST TEAR OUR LIVES APART TOO.

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME ANYONE EVEN THOUGHT ABOUT THEIR BAPTISM? IT'S HARD TO THINK ABOUT SOMETHING YOU CAN'T EVEN REMEMBER, RIGHT? BUT IF OUR FINAL AND DEEPEST ALLEGIANCE IS TO JESUS, TO THE LIFE HE HAS CALLED US TO LEAD, AND TO THE MANNER IN WHICH THE GOSPELS SHOW HE HAS CALLED US TO LEAD OUR LIVES, WELL THEN, THAT IS SURE TO BRING SOME DISRUPTION TO OUR LIVES.

DISRUPTION TO SO MUCH OF WHAT THE WORLD SAYS OUR DAYS SHOULD BE ABOUT.

DISRUPTION TO SO MANY OF OUR RELATIONSHIPS, TO OUR ALLEGIANCES AND AFFILIATIONS.

AND THAT'S NOT WHAT MANY OF US ARE LOOKING FOR.

BUT IF GOD HAS BROKEN THROUGH THE BARRIER AND BROKEN INTO OUR LIVES, THEN WHAT ENSUES IS NOT SOMETHING SIMPLER AND EASIER FOR US, BUT RATHER SOMETHING INFINITELY MORE COMPLEX AND URGENT.

BAPTISM MEANS THAT GOD HAS BROKEN THROUGH; AND SO WE, IN TURN, ARE CALLED TO TEAR INTO THE CHALLENGES AND PROBLEMS OF THE WORLD WITH EVERYTHING WE'VE BEEN GIVEN.

BAPTISM IS A SUMMONS TO BE PART OF THE REMARKABLE, REDEMPTIVE WORK OF GOD. TO GIVE OUR LIVES TO SOMETHING MORE CHALLENGING THAN ANY OTHER KIND OF WORK--- AND IN THE END, SURELY MORE BEAUTIFUL, TRUE, AND ENDURING THAN ANY OTHER KIND OF WORK.

JESUS CAME UP OUT OF THE WATERS, AND PERHAPS THAT IS WHAT HE SAW. A VISION OF GOD, AND A VISION OF WHAT IT WAS TO BE ALIVE THAT HE COULD GIVE HIS LIFE TO. THANKS BE TO GOD, THAT'S ALSO WHAT YOUR BAPTISM AND MINE WERE POINTING TO....AND THAT'S WHAT THEY ARE STILL POINTING TO.

NO MATTER WHERE YOU WERE BAPTIZED OR WHEN....THE WATER AND THE PROMISE AND THE PRAYER TOOK JUST A FEW MOMENTS. BUT TRULY SAYING YES TO OUR BAPTISM IS THE DAILY WORK OF THE REST OF OUR LIVES. IT IS SAYING YES TO THE WORLD AND YES TO A LIFE TORN OPEN BY THE LOVE OF GOD.

GRANTED, IT'S HIGHLY UNLIKELY THAT WE'LL DECIDE ANYTIME SOON TO REPLACE BAPTISM BY WATER AND THE SPIRIT WITH BAPTISM BY GRAVITY AND PARACHUTE. BUT AS YOU SHARE THE PEACE WITH ONE ANOTHER IN A FEW MOMENTS, REMEMBER THAT WHAT

UNITES US ALL IS SOMETHING GOD'S WORD TELLS US IS EVEN MORE ELECTRIFYING THAN JUMPING OUT OF A PLANE.

IN BAPTISM, THE HEAVENS THEMSELVES WERE TORN APART. AND WHEN WE EXPERIENCE THAT FOR OURSELVES, WHEN WE KNOW THAT FOR OURSELVES, AND FEEL IT IN OUR HEARTS AT LAST, IT IS THE THRILL OF A LIFETIME.