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The Baptism Of The Lord

Texts: **Acts 19: 1-7; Mark 1: 4-13**

“What you’ve done becomes the judge of what you’re going to do—especially in other people’s minds. But when you’re traveling, you are what you are right there and then. People don’t have your past to hold against you. No yesterdays on the road.” -- William Least Heat Moon

The baptismal font stands at the front of our church. Can you tell me where it is right now, on the right side or the left, just from memory? It’s okay if you don’t know. It’s on the left hand side of the church, behind the piano and under the banner. You might have missed it for many reasons. It’s small, it’s ordinary, it fits right in. In itself, the font isn’t very impressive. We baptize babies there, well, usually babies. We sprinkle a little bit of water on their heads in the sign of the cross. We even warm the water up a bit so that it won’t be such a shock to the babies. They usually cry anyway. It’s a nice ritual, done by nice people for nice parents and it can be a bit humdrum if we have seen it all before a million times. There is no danger here. It’s not like a river, where the current can cause problems, and there is the ever present danger of slipping right under the water, and even if you manage to stay upright, the water might have things living in it, bad things of various sizes, from microscopic germs and parasites to macroscopic snakes and eels. It’s not muddy. It’s not cold. It’s safe. Parents like it that way. As a parent myself, I like it that way. No danger to infants or pastor.

It’s almost too safe; there’s nothing dramatic about it. In the ancient mystery religions, which were competitors to Christianity in the early years, some say imitators, they took the idea of baptism to a whole new level. One of their cults, for Cybele, the mother goddess, initiated their disciples with a ceremony called the taurobolium. They had a deep pit in the middle of their sanctuary, with stairs leading down. Over the pit was a place for a bull to stand, a platform punctured with holes in the floor, and in the pit was a place for the initiates to stand. When everything was ready the initiates went down into the pit, symbolizing death, and the priest killed the bull over top of them, so that the blood of the bull rained down on the initiates through the holes in the floor, the life blood of the bull symbolizing the new life the initiates were getting from Cybele, who would raise them from death. When they emerged blood-drenched from the pit, they were said to be cleansed and pure. Those people knew drama! It was messy, but unforgettable. But unfortunately for them, Cybele herself was quite forgettable, a figment of the imagination. Blood baptism is no more, but good old boring water baptism keeps on happening somewhere in the world pretty much every week.

When Jesus came to be baptized by John, there was nothing boring about it. John was a crazy dude, dressed in really itchy camel’s hair and with a leather belt around his waist – or possibly the text means it was around his waist and through his legs like some sort of ancient, leathery chastity belt, since the phrase “around his loins” is a bit strange, and simply wearing a belt

wouldn't have been anything much to mention. Whatever it was, people found it weird enough to mention and remember. Imagine some wild-haired holy man who was strange from tip to toe and you won't be far off. No one ever knew what he was going to do next. One day he was calling ordinary people to repentance, the next day he was going off on the religious leaders saying they were like trees to be chopped down and thrown in the fire, and the day after that he was accusing them of being like slithery, snakey vipers. It was a spectacle, and people went out to see the show, but ended up being convicted of their sinfulness. There was something about John that you just couldn't ignore. He was telling people about this mind-altering baptism that took away sins. Go down in the water as one kind of person, come up out of the water as another. Come out to see the show, leave as a new person before God.

That's what the Greek word for repentance really means: a mind alteration, a change in the way you think, and John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, or a rethinking of your life before God. John baptized in a river. It was a slow-moving river, muddy, not too wide, not too deep, not too much of anything, except that it happened to be the Jordan River, which is the place where the wandering tribes of Israel had crossed over for the first time into the promised land centuries before. On one side of the river, behind them, was their old life, the life in Egypt where they were slaves, the life of aimless wandering in the desert for forty years, where they were homeless, stateless, and always trying to get somewhere else. On the other side was settled life, civilization, the land that God had promised them. On the other side was a life before God in the land God had given them. Still difficult, but full of hope.

It's not a coincidence that John chose to baptize in *that* river, the Jordan River. A change in life, a before and an after, that was just what John's baptism was about: a change from being slaves of sin, from drifting through life to living with purpose, a change from just wandering aimlessly through life to living in freedom, living for God. So it's not surprising that he's out there at the Jordan. But John's not done. "This is all great," he says, "but it's just baptism with water. Just wait. Just wait. There's more. Someone is coming after me who 's way more powerful than I am. Why, I couldn't even bend down to tie his shoe laces, he's that much greater than me. When he comes, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit!" And that's when Jesus appeared. When he was baptized, there wasn't just some splashing going on. There wasn't just a dunk and be done with it! No way. When Jesus was baptized the heavens tore open. Now I don't know what that means exactly. Thunder? Lighting? A big boom? Or is it more symbolic, like an answer to Isaiah's prayer that God would tear open the heavens and come down? Who knows, but what we do know is that here is the Trinity, right here: God the Parent speaks from heaven, saying to Jesus, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased," and the Holy Spirit comes down on Jesus." It's a great scene, but if UCCers were producing it, we would probably all clap and have a reception for Jesus with cookies and cake and it would be lovely.

But the baptism of the Holy Spirit is dangerous baptism. It's not cookies and cake. The Spirit doesn't come to have crumpets. No! The Spirit takes Jesus out into the wilderness, away from

all that is human and known and civilized. The Spirit takes Jesus to the Wild Place, to be tempted by Satan to give it all up before he had begun. The Spirit drives Jesus out past the Jordan, out of the Promised Land, out to face his first great challenge, to face temptation just as we have had to face temptation, and Jesus, the baptized Jesus, beats those temptations. That's what the Spirit's baptism does. The Spirit's baptism gets you moving, takes you places you didn't expect, brings out parts of you you didn't know were in there.

That's why in our other story today, about Paul in Ephesus, when Paul lays hands on the disciples there, and the Holy Spirit comes upon them, weird things start happening: they speak with strange sounds and they start talking about Jesus, which is what prophesying usually meant in the early church. The Spirit is disruptive and powerful, taking us out of our comfort zone and into the Spirit zone, a place where anything can happen, where we can do more than we ever thought we could, a place where we are with Jesus more powerfully than we can imagine. That's what we need in our church, that's what we need to make sure of, that we don't just have the baptism of John, but the baptism of Jesus, of the Holy Spirit and of fire. Most of us have had a baptism with water; I believe the Spirit did come then. But I think the Spirit can come more powerfully again. I think the Spirit is waiting to burst forth in our church to make us even better disciples of Jesus, to fill us up again so we're not running on empty.

So I'm inviting you all to do something with that water in front of you. If you are with someone else, let them take some of that water and make the sign of the cross on your forehead, in the name of the Parent, and the Son and the Holy Spirit; then you do it for them. If you are alone, you can do it yourself. It's not a rebaptism. It's a remembrance of your baptism, and an invitation for the Spirit to come on you afresh. If you haven't been baptized with water yet, we can do that when we get back into church. For now, go ahead and make that sign of the cross on your forehead as an *anticipation* of your baptism which is to come. The Spirit will understand the invitation. I know this is scary. I know it feels strange. I know it feels a little dangerous! That's as it should be! It's not a taurobolium; we're not slaying any bulls over you! But it's just as powerful, just as wild, because it is with God's untamed Spirit that we have to do.

Let the water flow, and let the Spirit come! Let the Spirit come! Let's do this! This is our Jordan. This is our crossing over. With the Spirit's help, this is our new chance at a before and an after. I'll give you a second more to finish up.

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Let us pray: O God of water and the Spirit, fill us with Your power to live differently. Let the Spirit fall on us anew. Stay with us forever, and guide our lives.

Amen

