

**Entrance to the way of peace<sup>1</sup>**  
Mark 1:1-8

It's advent and this morning I'm going to talk about baptism. This hasn't been a common advent theme for some time, I know, but I hope by the end of the sermon, it won't seem so incongruous.

Our advent text for this morning Mark 1:1-8 speaks of baptism, even as it moves very quickly on to other themes and events.

The good news as recorded for us in Mark is actually kind of fun in its relentless pace.

In the first 20 verses alone we get the following:

John the Baptist prepares the way and proclaims a baptism of repentance.

People from all over confess their sins and get baptized in the Jordan.

Jesus also gets baptized.

The Holy Spirit descends as a dove.

God is well pleased.

The Spirit sends Jesus into the wilderness.

The angels take care of him.

John the Baptist is arrested and

Jesus starts his ministry in Galilee. That's the first 20 verses.

Before the end of the chapter he will have called his first disciples, preached in the synagogue with confidence, done several healings, has cast out demons and has become so popular that he can no longer move about freely.

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In order to keep pace with this relentless movement some commentaries tend to skip over John's call to the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. You can see why that seems like last year's news by the time you get to the end of the first chapter. These same commentaries don't normally skip over Jesus' baptism, but don't dwell on that preparatory baptism of repentance and forgiveness that John is practicing in the wilderness as part of his "prepare the way" announcement. So you may have already gathered that baptism as part of the "prepare the way" announcement may make it an appropriate advent theme, because Advent is in part a time of preparation. The good news of Jesus Christ – that's what the whole book of Mark is about begins with preparation and part of that preparation begins with a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Now, one more thing, as part of my introduction, "to whom am I directing this sermon?"

As with most of my sermons, I'm addressing it to myself first, and as one who is baptized so of course to those who are already baptized, but I hope there is also something valuable here for those who are not or who are thinking about it.

Also, I entitled my sermon, "the entrance to the way of peace," because I will make a case that baptism provides this entrance and I'll also want to flesh out what I mean by the "way of peace," particularly as I understand it in the book of the gospel of Mark.

I begin honestly that I don't actually think about my own baptism very often. I'm not sure what your experience has been. Is it like the proverbial question: how do fish describe the water they swim in? How does one describe a reality that one can't actually place oneself outside of?

But something tells me that if I do think of it more often, if I bring it to mind, this mindfulness may enrich my life of faithfulness.

In this gospel and in our traditional understanding, baptism by water signifies a spiritual cleansing or forgiveness that follows repentance and confession of sins. It means more than that, but let's start there.

Confession of sins requires that we actually have to think about what our sins are, confess them to God, by speaking them out loud or silently in prayer,  
ask for forgiveness,  
and hope in our inner most being that we will experience forgiveness;  
God's forgiveness, through Christ.

This morning in our worship, as is sometimes common we prayed a prayer of confession. Again, I don't know about you, but sometimes these corporate confessions make me squirm, not because they have enlightened me about my own sinfulness though that may indeed be true, but because, as a corporate prayer, they don't always express

things the way I would personally. This morning is a case in point. While I accept the first part that I have sometimes done wrong, both sins of omission and commission in my family or neighbourhood, workplace or church, I don't think of myself as normally one to try to "pay back" and although, I'm sure I can be mean, up until the argument that I had with my spouse yesterday, I hadn't been mean for a while, so when I wrote this earlier in the week "being mean" didn't cover me, but God sought fit to humble me in that regard. But if you have never been mean or tried to pay anyone back for wrongs committed against you maybe that's why the writers of this confession added that last part, "times when we didn't realize the wrong we were doing." That covers everything that we don't realize we're doing wrong. And so as part of my baptismal commitment I submit to the importance of the worship life of the community and confess along with all of you that I have at times done wrong, and long for or desire a constantly regenerated heart, mind and life.

And I was really grateful this morning for the time of silence, because it is there that God can reveal to me what I need to bring to God and what I most need forgiveness for. Some of us need words. Some of us need silence. All of us need to confess, be forgiven and then be reassured, that we are right with God and each other. "Restore our peace, O God." We said. And after the leader's words of assurance, we reminded ourselves that it is God who gives us this gift of peace.

How is baptism, the entrance to this way peace? Can't we just confess, change our minds and our life's orientation, (that's another way to

speaking about repentance) can't we just give intellectual consent to the fact that we aren't perfect? We mess up pretty regularly and know that God loves and forgives us. Why must one be baptized? What's that got to do with it?

I got close to explaining it earlier when I said that even though I squirm when I don't like the way the confession is worded, or I don't like that it is taking me too close to my actual sins, at baptism, I not only confessed that I sin and repented, let's put that in different words, not only did I admit that I do wrong things and confirmed that the orientation of my life was going to be one of following Jesus, I also entered a covenant with the church of Jesus Christ and committed to following Jesus with others. I committed to a corporate life and sometimes within worship and at other times that means submission to the voice and mind and heart of the whole body, not just my own.

I realize that I'm using a lot of generally unpopular words this morning, sin, repentance, confession and commitment and submission to the corporate body of Christ.

I can't think of much that is more counter-cultural than all of the above. In a world of positive thinking, what good does it do to remember your sin? In a world of I'm okay, you're okay, "why confess?" If we know God loves and forgives us, why do we ask for forgiveness and not only that – mark all of that with the cleansing water of baptism?

And here I pray, "God help me answer this question." This is where the role of the Holy Spirit comes in. Confession, repentance and forgiveness in and of themselves begin to create a sense of peace, inner peace thanks be to God, because of the inner working of the Spirit. I think that's what all those folks that flocked to the desert for baptism by John were seeking. But John also says, "I'm here to prepare the way. I baptize you with water, but the one who comes after me, the one who is greater than me, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Baptism by water is the entrance to something greater. This something greater can be called the *way of peace* in Mark because it is about so much more than inner personal peace and regeneration. If inner peace were all there were we would be in danger of participating in what Dietrich Bonhoeffer so famously called cheap grace.

*"cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ."*

As I was looking at this I tried to substitute the word peace where Bonhoeffer uses the word grace, and while it doesn't work exactly, it would also be true to say there is no peace where there is not forgiveness and repentance, baptism and church discipline, communion and confession, discipleship and the cross, and a true following after Jesus.

Well, Mark doesn't allow us to sit passively and soak up our cheap grace or participate in a limited peace, by having – that once and for all, now I can do what I want, just between God and me, one time experience. The

whole book is about discipleship. Quoting Bonhoeffer again, *"costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus, it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. It is costly because it compels [one] to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."*

However, that yoke is still a yoke. I want to quote Mark later in the gospel. Contextually, this quote comes just after Jesus had finished explaining to the disciples that in Jerusalem he will be mocked and flogged and killed and then raised after three days and James and John audaciously ask to sit at his right and left hand in glory. Here's the quote: Jesus replies, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" This quote and our Anabaptist understanding of what it means to follow Jesus have influenced why our confession of faith in a Mennonite perspective says that our baptism into the body of Christ is a baptism of water, Spirit and blood. The way of peace, according to the gospel of Mark, may end in martyrdom. "Are you willing to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" This way of peace is not an absence of danger or conflict, rather it defines who we are and how we are in the midst of danger and conflict. The Syrian pastors and Bishops we heard about last week from Doug and Naomi Enns are living out their own baptisms of water, Spirit and blood as they live the way of peace in a place where their lives are not safe. They know intimately that the way of peace is both costly and worth it.

But here in Canada we don't live as they live. We are not necessarily reminded daily about the costly commitment of our baptism. The story I'm about to tell next may seem like a bit of an aside, but bear with me.

I was given a book this week, in honour of my recent graduation, entitled, *Sleeping with bread*.

And in it there is this brief story that explains the title of the book.

*During the bombing raids of World War II, thousands of children were orphaned and left to starve. The fortunate ones were rescued and placed in refugee camps where they received food and good care. But many of these children who had lost so much could not sleep at night. They feared waking up to find themselves once again homeless and without food. Nothing seemed to reassure them. Finally, someone hit upon the idea of giving each child a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. Holding their bread, these children could finally sleep in peace. All through the night the bread reminded them, "Today I ate and I will eat again tomorrow."*

I realize that I have not been talking about bread. I have been talking about the waters of baptism. And our war is not a war of bombs and food scarcity, it is rather a war of ideologies and constant competition for our allegiance. In light of this war, what benefit might there be in a daily ritual for remembering the commitments of one's baptism? I imagine a glass of water at the bedside each night. Each night the water could remind one to reminisce about one's day and confess what needs to be confessed. In the morning, a glance at the water might remind one of one's commitment to follow Jesus in the way of peace, wherever it may lead in this day.



By the power of the Spirit,  
by the reminder of the water, "I have committed to live the way of peace  
today, I commit myself again to live it tomorrow."

As I prepare for the coming of Christ, past, present and future in this  
advent season, I want to recommit myself to remembering my baptism.  
If you are baptized, I welcome you to do the same. If you are not, I invite  
you to open yourself to the work of the Spirit in your own life during  
this time of preparation. Are you experiencing a Spirit nudge to make  
public your commitment or even your desire to commit to follow Jesus  
in the way of peace? If so, please talk with anyone in the congregation  
whom you trust to walk alongside you as you ask yourself what you are  
hearing from the spirit in your inner being. With John the Baptist, let us  
prepare the way of the Lord.