

"And now for something completely different"
 Readings from the Old Testament: Genesis 1:1-2; Psalm 2:1-7; Isaiah 42:1
 Reading from the Gospels: Mark 1:9-15

In a recurring bit of the classic and quirky British Comedy troupe, Monty Python's Flying Circus, at the end of a sketch, John Cleese, mimicking the typically staid television news reader with perfect diction, would look into the camera and solemnly announce, "And now for something completely different." Immediately, the video would shift to another setting where, perhaps, two fishermen are slapping one another in the face with the day's catch, haddock vs. cod. Cleese wasn't lying. It certainly was something completely different.

I wonder ... did the oft-used Python quote cross Jesus' mind as he waded into Jordan's waters. It has certainly crossed my mind at life's inflection points. And now, for something completely different.

By June of '89, I had presided at weddings, I had sung at weddings, I had ushered, been a groomsman, and wound up in a swimming pool wearing a tuxedo at various weddings. Yet, I had never had my name typeset on the invitation to a wedding. This was going to be something completely different. Standing at the apex of the nave,

looking down that long center aisle to the rear door of the crowded sanctuary, my heart leapt from my chest with the appearance of the stunning bride, who within the next forty minutes would no longer be my future wife, but simply, yet miraculously, my wife. A traditional statement about marriage, included in many wedding liturgies is, "In marriage, two people are called to a **new way of life**, created, ordered, and blessed by God. This way of life must not be entered into carelessly, or from selfish motives, but responsibly and prayerfully."

As is true with every couple, I probably didn't fully appreciate the meaning of the covenant I was entering that day, but I did know enough to understand that the young tuxedoed man standing in that sanctuary would leave that sanctuary fundamentally changed. Inestimably, even eternally grateful for that inflection point in my life, it numbers as one of many life transitions navigated in every life, passages that form and reform you; humble you; mature you; ennoble you; and make you, altering your self-understanding; reordering your priorities; redirecting your efforts; and creating your identity.

Life is a series of before/after inflection points: baptism; your first step; your first word; your first day of school; your first love; your first

job; your first day as a parent; the first time someone close to you dies; marriage; career change; an adoption; a layoff; a divorce; retirement; illness; a natural disaster; a pandemic. At each inflection point you walk away different than when you entered. There is so often a clear distinction between each side of the inflection point. Life in some ways is a series of before/after photos snapped at each inflection point along the way.

In the recent cartoon movie, *Soul*, there is a scene in which a typically taciturn youth is dragged by his father to a jazz club. Joe's an adolescent; it's his job to assume every activity his dad suggests is lame. But, certainly against his will, into the jazz club he goes. Yet once inside, the music showers him with wonder, seizes his deepest self, and wraps him with purpose. He leaves that jazz club changed, his life focus altered, his dreams and plans suddenly reformed and redirected.

For Joe, life would then be divided into life before jazz and life with jazz. When listening to the stories of artists, writers, teachers, athletes, physicians, scientists, and craftsmen, they can often point to an encounter, a moment in time, an introduction that fundamentally altered their life's course. Perhaps the foremost jazz vocalist of the day,

Diane Reeves, speaks eloquently of a night in her hometown of Denver during her youth. She occasionally had the opportunity to sing in the local jazz club, and found herself one night in the dressing room as her idol, a legend, was performing. She spied a pair of her idols shoes and couldn't resist the temptation. So for just a moment, she literally, and thereafter metaphorically, stepped into the shoes of the legendary singer Ella Fitzgerald. I went to college with a guy intent on pursuing a career in physical therapy as a result of the care he received from a physical therapist when injured as an athlete in high school. Your life may be just such a story.

In our text today, we witness an event that not only shapes and forms a young carpenter from Nazareth, but also reshapes and reforms the world into which he has entered. "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"

Now, this is one of those moments when we need to resist the temptation to fuse the four gospels into one seamless narrative.

Knowing that Mark was the first of the gospels to be written, his audience didn't have the luxury of turning to the other gospels to flesh out the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. In Mark, we do not have a birth narrative. There are no shepherds abiding in their fields; no angels singing a heavenly chorus; no star over Bethlehem. In fact, there is no mention of Bethlehem at all. In Mark, there are no gift-bearing visitors from the east, no childhood visits to the Jerusalem temple, and no lost and found department in the temple for Mary and Joseph to rush to in search of a missing Jesus. In Mark, we aren't introduced to Jesus until John the Baptist sees him coming forward for baptism. Thus, what matters most for Mark in Jesus' life up to this point is what transpires here in the wilderness waters of the Jordan which sets the stage for all that will follow.

Mark goes to great lengths to identify John the Baptist in the tradition of the Old Testament prophet and cloak the setting with the aura of Israel's origin narrative in the wilderness. Mark is quoting Isaiah, dressing John the Baptist in the retro uniform of the prophet, and placing him, not in the area of Jerusalem's temple or Jerusalem at all, but out in the wilderness with crowds of seekers for whom the

status quo is not working. They are coming out in search of mercy and a new direction, in a way reminiscent of that earlier generation of mercurial ex-slaves wandering through the wilderness in search of an identity.

You would think the flow of seekers would be headed in the opposite direction, toward Jerusalem and its temple where meaning and identity were to be found. Jerusalem. Zion. God's "holy hill". The Psalmist proclaims, "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth." Jerusalem was the *it* city for Israel; the *happenin'* place; the place people made pilgrimages to, not from. But for many, the achievement of the hoped for, worked for, sweated for, sacrificed for life had left them filled, yet increasingly unfulfilled. For many, life had become a sort of paint by numbers proposition, filling in all the boxes with the correct colors, well enough to at least give the impression of an enviable life. McMansion - check. Lawn service - check. Low handicap at the club - check. Business class status - check. Worship, when it's convenient - check. Good schools - check. Trendy clothes - check.

Yet, something was definitely missing. The scenario is no less common today than it was then. Anne Lamott observed, "Your problem

is how you are going to spend this one and precious life you have been issued. Whether you're going to spend it trying to look good and creating the illusion that you have power over circumstances, or whether you are going to taste it, enjoy it and find out the truth about who you are.” The second option may not be as photogenic, won't look like the envy magnet in the glossy magazine photo, but at least it will be real, and that is where meaning is discovered. Viktor Frankl, the noted psychiatrist, philosopher, and Holocaust survivor said, "Man is originally characterized by his "search for meaning" rather than his "search for himself." The more he forgets himself—giving himself to a cause or another person—the more human he is. And the more he is immersed and absorbed in something or someone other than himself the more he really becomes himself.” (Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*)

So, the filled, yet unfulfilled and frustrated queue up on the banks of the Jordan to receive John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance literally means a needed change of direction, and that is precisely what the crowd was missing. Well, standing in line, waiting his turn, was this fellow named Jesus who had come down from Nazareth. Yes, that Jesus, you know, *Wonderful Counselor, Mighty*

God, Prince of Peace. That Jesus, the One "by whose stripes we are healed;" the One to whom "every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess." That Jesus.

So, what is that Jesus doing, standing there in line, waiting his turn, surrounded by the filled, yet unfulfilled seekers, looking for mercy and a new direction? Paul knew. To the Corinthians, he wrote, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." To the same ornery crowd of Corinth, Paul writes, "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us" ... and also, "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

"In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." Two essential events take place in this singular act. First, as the water whelms Jesus body, he is acting out what Paul declared, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Receiving this baptism, Jesus is visibly identifying himself with what

God will carry out through his own life, death, and resurrection, accomplishing for us what we could not accomplish for ourselves, the ultimate reconciliation of all things.

In addition, as Jesus rises from the water, he sees the heavens rip open; he feels the Spirit descending into his very being; and he hears the voice of God claiming him as his own and validating what Jesus is about to set out to do. A baptism, yes, but so much more. This is an ordination, an inauguration, a commissioning, a coronation. You see, in Jesus, we find the central inflection point of all history. There is life before Jesus, and there is life with Jesus. As Jesus rises from the water, the world is forever changed. Why, as Jesus rises from the water, foreshadowing that day he will rise from the grave, and that Spirit descends into him, you can almost hear a chorus of cliches cascading down from heaven's heights. "Folks, there's a new sheriff in town;" "Ain't nothing gonna stop him now!" "He ... could ... go ... all ... the ... way!" "King me!"

Sure, powers and principalities will continue to live with the illusion that God can be managed, and that love is no match for earthly authority and might. Yet, this world and its powers are temporary, but

God's sovereignty and dominion and might are eternal. This world, our world, may self-destruct ... Lord knows we're working overtime to achieve that fate ... but, nevertheless, God's grace shall triumph. In fact, Mark, right here at the beginning of his gospel is telling us that it already has.

Perhaps you saw the PBS series this week on the history of the Black Church in America, and how the Black experience in our country resonates so searingly with the gospel of Jesus Christ and the struggle against the powers and authorities that deform and destroy and exclude. In one compelling segment, the Rev. Otis Moss III is preaching before a packed auditorium, a sort of camp meeting setting, and he's telling the story from Luke of the extraordinary effort by the friends of a paralytic to bring him to Jesus, even lowering the paralytic through the roof.

The room was so crowded. All the good seats were taken. All the good positions were filled. And Moss pauses to say, "Never confuse position with power. Pharaoh had the position, but Moses had the power. Herod had the position, but John had the power. The cross had the position, but Jesus had the power ... George Wallace had the

position, but Rosa Parks had the power." (Otis Moss III, from PBS, *The Black Church*) Rev. Moss' voiced soared with the truth revealed in the waters of the Jordan, that the powers and institutions of this world are transitory, but God's kingdom, revealed in Jesus Christ is eternal.

You can almost hear an emcee narrating the scene in the Jordan with the words of Psalm 2: "Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and his anointed, saying, 'Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us. He who sits in the heavens laughs;' The voice of the narrator fades as the voice of the Lord rises, continuing the psalm, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Our world's inflection point is not your typical before and after. Rather, Mark indicates that what we have in the inflection point of Jesus' baptism is Before Christ and With Christ. Nations may fall. People may wander. But the reign of Christ shall endure, and his grace will never, never, never let you go. Amen.

