

"JESUS, JOHN AND THE JORDAN RIVER"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

A professor in seminary once told us to always announce a text at the beginning of a sermon...for as he said, it would give people something to think about while you're preaching. So here it is,

"In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee....and was baptized by John in the Jordan". (Mark 1: 9)

Jesus, John and the Jordan River. Perhaps a better title for today's sermon might have been "A Lesson From Two Golfers and A Saint". So stay with me and let's see where all of this goes.

DEVELOPMENT

Saint Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, as you may know was a very devout Roman Catholic evangelist originally from Wales. There's a story that has come down to us from his ministry that has to do with the time when he was baptizing new converts in a river in the emerald isle. He would wade out waistdeep in the water and then call for new Christians to come to him....one by one...to receive the Sacrament of Baptism.

There was the day when he baptized a mountain chieftain. Patrick was holding a staff - called a crosier - in his hands as the new converts to the Faith made their way into the water. Unfortunately, as he was lowering the chief down under the water three times, he also pressed his staff down into the river bottom. Afterwards the people on the river bank noticed their chief limping back to shore. Someone explained to Saint Patrick that, as he pressed the wooden staff into the river bed, he must have also bruised the foot of the chief. Patrick, they say, went over to the chief at once and asked,

"Why did you not cry out when I struck your foot?" And somewhat surprised, the chief answered, "I remembered your telling us about the nails in the feet of Jesus as he was on the cross...and I thought my pain was a part of my baptism...."

Reading that....I wondered how many of us would have been baptized if we had known that some pain....some discomfort...was going to be a part of the process.

BACK TO THE TEXT

Back to the Bible...to our text. John the Baptist was in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for sins committed and all the people of Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside were going out to be baptized by him. And among those who received John's baptism in the Jordan river, Mark tells us in his simple, understated way, was one Jesus.... from Nazareth in Galilee. And when Jesus came out of the water, immediately...

"He saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove....and a voice came from heaven, saying, 'Thou art my beloved Son...with Thee I am well pleased'".

Now certainly this was a significant milestone in the life of Jesus. Until this time His ministry had been centered in the artistry and hard labor of a carpenter's shop in his hometown. We have no indication that He ever used the carpenter's shop as a pulpit.

Remember the surprise of His family and friends and neighbors when He began His ministry? Why...it's as if He came out of nowhere. Today we would probably say that Jesus came into the ministry as a second career, a second vocation. He had been in business...out in the world. But now at the age of thirty, He hears a call in His heart and He answers that call by being baptized and it's his very own cousin, John, who performs it. And as He comes out of the muddy waters of the Jordan, He has a rather unique spiritual experience. Later on He was to say of it....that the heavens opened....and He felt and saw the Holy Spirit descending on Him like a dove. And that voice....the very voice of God, saying:

"Thou art My beloved Son! With Thee
I am well pleased."

Now...when you and I got baptized...chances are that we did not have that kind of a dramatic experience. We probably didn't see the heavens open. And those of us who were baptized as infants have no remembrance of the event at all. At least I don't. I was once told that my father, who was a Methodist preacher up in the Schoharie farmlands of our state and who baptized me, slipped in a second middle name at the moment of baptism. The name was "Cadman" and my mother was not "well pleased" with that last moment change. S. Parks Cadman was a NYC preacher to whom my father listened on the radio on Sunday mornings back in the late twenties. Some of you have heard of S. Parks Cadman..... same man for whom Cadman Plaza in downtown Brooklyn was named.

Let me put three thoughts before you regarding baptism, for it is a milestone in the lives of people whether it's infant baptism or adult baptism.

A PLACE IN THE FAMILY OF GOD

Whenever I baptize either an infant or an adult, it is saying to me that this person has a place in the family of God. Nobody can tell us that our lives don't matter. Nobody can tell us that we are unloved....we are part of the family of God.

Charlie Brown and Linus are talking in a Peanuts cartoon. Linus says,

"I feel kind of depressed today. Do you ever have the feeling that life has passed you by, Charlie Brown?" And Charlie Brown answers, "Worse than that....sometimes I think life and I are going in opposite directions!"

Perhaps you've felt that way at times...I think we all have and it is at such times that we need to remind ourselves, as did Martin Luther, that "we are baptized"....that we are members of the family of God. We are God's own sons and daughters and this was not our own doing. It was by the GRACE of God that we were elected to this high station as children of God, a part of His family.

Seeing Tiger Woods hit a golf ball under pressure in a play-off round within eight inches of the pin last Sunday afternoon...reminded me of an article that was printed sometime back about Golf Pro, Harvey Penick. Recently this 90-year old golfer has hit the jack-pot with two books on golf both of which have sold nearly two million copies.

There's a bit of a story behind the first book, entitled, Little Red Book. Back in the nineteen twenties, Penick bought a red spiral notebook and began jotting down his many observations about golf. He never showed the book to any-

one except his son until 1991 when he shared it with a local writer who gave him the encouragement to bring it together and publish it. He left word with Penick's wife that Simon and Schuster had agreed to an advance of \$90,000.

When the writer saw Penick later, the old man seemed troubled. Finally, he came clean. With all of his medical bills, he said, there was just no way he could advance Simon and Schuster that much money - \$ 90,000. The writer had to explain that Penick would be the one to receive that \$ 90,000...not Simon and Schuster.

How often we mistakenly view God's offer of grace...of salvation, if you will, that comes to us in Christ just like Harvey Penick mistakenly perceived Simon and Schuster's offer of an advance. We're tempted to ask...."well, what must I do?" and God answers back...."just receive". And if you elect "to receive", rest assured there's no pain....no risk....nothing like the javelin thrower experienced in a contest where he elected to receive.

We have a place in the family of God. It is God's free gift to all who will receive it. Baptism signifies that we are part of God's great family. It may mean nothing to some of you today, but there may come that day when it does.

SINS ARE FORGIVEN

Baptism also signifies that our sins are forgiven. I hope that I'm not sounding "too matter of fact" when I say that for it is so easy for us to think to ourselves,

"Hey....this is a great system. I sin, God forgives. I sin and God forgives. I sin and God forgives...in infinitum...." And so it goes.

But on the contrary....this forgiveness of God is a costly enterprise. I read somewhere that comedian Jack Handy has a segment on Saturday Night Live called Deep Thoughts. One amusing and, at the same time, not so amusing "deep thought" goes like this...

"If a kid asks where rain comes from, a cute thing to tell him is, 'God is crying'...and if he asks why God is crying another cute thing to tell him is....'It's probably because of something you did'...." Which really is a good way to cause a child to feel some guilt....

Yet, it brings to mind a story that author, Walter Wangerin, tells about an experience he once had with his son. It seems that when his son, Matthew, was about seven years old and in second grade, he became fascinated with comic books and so much so, that one day he stole some from the library. When Walter, his father, found the comic books in his son's room, he confronted him, corrected him, disciplined him and took him back to the library to return the books. Matthew received a pretty stern lecture regarding stealing from the librarian and also from his father. Chances are some of us can remember something similar in our lives.

However, the following summer it happened again. Seven year old, Matthew, now eight, stole some comic books from a resort Gift Shop. And again, father corrected son and told him how wrong it was to steal. A year later, Matthew

once again stole comic books...this time from a drug store. Walter, the father, decided the time had come for him to do something to get his son's attention in order to underscore the seriousness of stealing. And so he took Matthew into his study and said,

"Matthew....I have never spanked you before, and I don't want to now, but somehow I've got to get through to you and help you to see how wrong it is to steal....."

And so Walter bent Matthew over and spanked him hard...five times with his bare hand. Matthew's eyes moistened with tears and he sat there looking at the floor. His father then said,

"Matthew.....I'm going to leave you alone for a little while. Sit here and I'll be back in a few minutes.."

Walter Wangerin stepped out of the study. And he reports to us that he just couldn't help himself. He, himself, broke down and cried....he, the father, cried and cried. Then he washed his face and went back into the study to talk to his son...now nine years of age. From that moment on, Matthew never stole again...but years later, as Matthew and his mother were driving home from somewhere they had been, they talked about some memories of his childhood. They remembered the incident with the comic books....stolen. Matthew said,

"Mom....you know that after that I never stole anything again from anybody and I never will". His mother asked him, "Was it because your father spanked you that day?" "Oh, no....." Matthew explained....."Mom...it was because I heard dad crying...."

Perhaps some person present can remember how as a child we felt the pain when we saw one of our parents cry. And even worse was the knowledge that we were responsible for those tears. Do any of you remember....

Grace is never cheap. It's amazing, but it's never cheap. Our sins are vile and destructive acts that bring harm into God's world...harm perhaps to ourselves, to our families, to our friends, to those who have trusted us...harm to our reputation, to our character and harm to what it means to be a child of God.

John's baptism was for those who had repented of their sins. We can't be baptized every time God forgives us, but baptism can be a reminder of that great, great love God has for us....and that because of that love, our sins are forgiven.

NEVER TOO LATE TO START OVER

And that brings us to the final reason that this simple rite of baptism is so important in our lives. To me, baptism is suggesting that it is never too late to start over again. We don't have to stay "where we are". We can begin again.

Soren Kierkegaard once asked how a person who is already a Christian can become a Christian. Think about that for a moment...turn it over in your mind. How can a person who is a Christian already become a Christian. I think that Kierkegaard was directing his thoughts toward those of us who have grown up in the Church. He was suggesting that "second-hand faith" is not enough. I think it is so easy to take the faith we've grown up with for granted. It's a bit like

the air we breathe. It's always been there. We need something more than that. Baptism reminds us that a fresh encounter of God's grace and of God's love is always available to us....if we seek it.

I said earlier that I had two golf stories...and here's the second as we come to the end of the course. In 1971 a man by the name of Jim Reid moved to Florida to work for Disney World as a surveyor. In his spare time Reid took up scuba diving and often searched for sunken treasures in old ship-wrecks. One day he put on his gear and dove into a water hazard at his local golf course. And there, much to his amazement he discovered in that tiny lake thousands of golf balls. The manager of the club offered him ten cents a ball for all he could retrieve. Believe it or not, but Jim Reid made almost as much in one day as he did all week long as a surveyor.

He proceeded to quit his job with Disney World and submerged himself in his new business of diving for golf balls where there were water hazards. As he moved around Florida, he became known as the Used Golf Ball King of Florida. He called his new business, "Second Chance". In 1994 it was doing so well that he decided to sell it....which he did for one million dollars. Not bad, I'd say. He made a pretty good living finding golf balls that others thought were lost and irretrievable. Oh, it wasn't always easy work....but it sure brought him some great rewards.

Jim Reid is not the only one who specializes in finding that which is lost. God is the ultimate finder of that which others marked off as irretrievable. What God finds is not lost golf balls, of course....but lost people.

CLOSING Hopefully, our baptism ought always to remind us that when we stray from being what God has created us to be, He comes to us to give us the chance to start over. The heavens didn't open on that day long ago when we were baptized, nor did we hear any voice, but our baptism is nonetheless precious to us. It tells us that we are loved, a part of God's great family. It reminds us that there is forgiveness for that which we may have done. And it tells us, too, that we can make a new beginning.

And so with God's help, may that experience of baptism which seems so distant to so many of us....in our lives....may it be fresh within our consciousness this day that we may know and always cherish its significance lives. Jesus. John. And the Jordan River. Amen.

PRAYER Make us sensitive once again, O God, to Your nearness and to Your presence in these moments. Wrestle with us in the shadowy corners of our lives where sin and selfishness sometimes surface....and remind us that our lives are precious in your sight, that we belong to Your family, that our sins are forgiven and that there is always the opportunity for a second chance, a fresh start and a new beginning. Remembering Jesus and John and the day of His baptism, we pray. Amen.