

Genesis 1:1-5
Psalm 29
Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:4-11

Sermon for January 10, 2020

The FORERUNNER
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Summary: The baptism of repentance and the baptism of grace.

We are now over a week into the New Year, and we can begin to get our feet under us as get accustomed to the fact that another year has passed, and a brand new year with new possibilities and new adventures lie ahead.

The readings for today are especially appropriate for this particular Sunday, dealing as they all do with new beginnings.

The verses from Genesis are, of course, the very first of the whole Bible, and themselves describe the new beginning of all new beginnings, creation itself, by the power of the word of God. God literally speaks being into existence.

And our psalm reading fleshes out that power of the word of God:

29:3 The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD is over many waters.

29:4 The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.

And then we come to John the Baptist.

John was an extraordinary individual. We learn from Luke's Gospel that John and Jesus were close cousins, and of almost the same age. And yet they had clearly led very different lives.

Jesus had spent his thirty or so years in complete obscurity, plying his trade as a carpenter in a small town named Nazareth, probably helping his mother care for his younger brothers and sister, studying his Hebrew Scriptures, meditating, praying, and quietly waiting for the time when he might emerge from this peaceful existence.

John, on the other hand, had become famous throughout Israel. A desert ascetic with a fiery tongue, people flocked from all over the country to hear his revolutionary message of repentance, and to submit themselves to His baptism of repentance.

John is often spoken of as the forerunner of Jesus and repeatedly emphasizes that John himself gave priority to one who would come after him. The passage from Mark we read today contains an example of that. John's opening words in that passage are:

*"The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.
1:8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

But there are suggestions elsewhere in the New Testament accounts that perhaps the story was a little more complicated than that. One such passage is the one we read from the book of Acts.

In the passage, we learn that the apostle Paul, thirty or so years after the crucifixion of Christ, was visiting the city of Ephesus, and here he meets a group of a dozen or so people who considered themselves followers of John the Baptist. Ephesus is in western Turkey, a long, long way from Israel. So what that tells us is that John's influence had reached a long way and continued even decades after his death, and the death of his cousin, Jesus.

In talking with them, Paul asks whether they've been baptized, and they answer that they have received John's baptism, which, as Paul notes, is a baptism of repentance. Paul then re-baptises them, this time in the name of Jesus, and as an immediate result they receive the Holy Spirit..

Let's think for a moment about these two baptisms, and what the difference is between them.

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke give much fuller accounts of the nature of John's preaching, and anyone who reads those accounts and compares them with the preaching of Jesus can see the radical difference. John's preaching is full of fire and brimstone. It was basically a warning and a threat. The preaching of Jesus, on the other hand, is the good news, the gospel. No one could call John's preaching good news, because it threatened doom and damnation.

But although it was not Good News, it was a necessary step on the way. I believe that's the intuition John was expressing, when he speaks humbly of the one who is to come after him. It was an intuition that the complete religious life involves more than repentance, that repentance is instead the necessary first step to something far greater.

And surely Christ teaches us that that is the case in the individual religious life. First there is a stage in which we are awakened to our own inadequacy and failure in the eyes of God. And that stage is connected in time with our own efforts to do better, to be better, and in which we inevitably fail.

The second stage is when we accept the gift of grace offered by Jesus Christ, when we see and accept that through that grace all of our condemnation by God is taken away. And closely connected with that stage is when we find that all our efforts to do better and to be better are fertilized and strengthened by the work of the Holy Spirit, who awakens in us when we accept the gift of grace, so we can begin to do what we could never do by ourselves.

The men in Ephesus knew the condemnation of God; they appreciated their religious duty to do better and to be better, under threat of divine punishment. In other words, they exemplified the preaching of John.

But they did not know the grace of Christ and the help of the Holy Spirit. Their religion was still one of struggle and self-reliance; it was not yet a religion of peace. It was not the religion of Christ, the religion we call Christianity.

John the Baptist might have said, "Come to me, all ye who are weak and heavy-burdened, and I will frighten you into repentance." As Christ himself put it: *Come to me, all ye who are weak and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.*

This incident in Ephesus illustrates this in perfect fashion. After learning that the men had received John's baptism of repentance, Paul almost certainly taught them the good news of Jesus Christ, the Gospel. And once they had received that and accepted it by submitting to another baptism, they received the Holy Spirit. My own guess was that these men probably provided the core for the new Christian Church in Ephesus, the city where Paul spent longer than anywhere else, and to whom, of course, he wrote his great Letter to the Ephesians.

And so we come back to the River Jordan, and the day Jesus appeared on the banks of the river and waited in line to receive John's baptism.

In our passage and in several others, John accepts his role of forerunner. What is a forerunner?

The Greek word Mark used is like the English word, in that it can have several meanings. It can mean simply one who precedes, as an ancestor might precede you in your family line. It can mean someone who is an earlier, more primitive model of something yet to come: The Model T was the forerunner of the Model A. It can mean someone sent out in advance to scout out the territory that lies ahead, literally running out in front of an army, for example. And it can have other meanings as well.

But as I was thinking about this passage, I remembered reading about a runner who set the new world record for the mile recently. It was actually a team effort, because several other runners took turns running in front of the eventual winner in order to break down the wind resistance for him. And I believe they do the same sort of thing sometimes in cycling and Nascar races: someone runs ahead to make it possible for the one coming next to win.

It's not a perfect analogy, obviously, but I think it makes a pretty good image of the sense in which John's ministry was necessary before the ministry of Christ could take place. John had to bring the nation to a recognition of its own inadequacy in God's eyes, before Jesus could take them beyond that recognition to the awareness of God's abiding love and forgiveness through grace. We may switch images, and say that John created the thirst, and Jesus supplied the water.

And in exactly that same manner, the biography of every Christian will have two stages: the thirst and the quenching of the thirst. The fourth Beatitude, we remember, teaches us that *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness*. We remember that on the last day of the great festival of tabernacles in Jerusalem, Jesus stood up before a large crowd and cried out in a loud voice: "*If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink!*" (John 7: 37), the same thing he said to the Samaritan woman at the well: ...whoever drinks of the water I give them will never thirst again (John 4: 14).

Remember those times in the summer when you've been out working or playing in the hot sun. You're sweaty and tired and baking hot, and someone offers you a cold glass of water, and it's the best thing you've ever drunk in your life? At that moment, you'd rather have that glass of water than any other drink in the world.

That's the kind of thirst Jesus was talking about, and the kind of relief and joy from thirst that he offers.

And so our prayer for today, Gracious God, is that we may experience the thirst for righteousness, however distressing it might be, in order that we might also experience the relief and joy provided by the living water who is Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.