

THE WATERMARK¹
Mark 1: 4-11
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
January 8, 2012

In this post-Christmas, pre-Easter season, the church and the culture will settle back into the familiar rhythms. Our culture will tip its hat to festivals like Martin Luther King Day, Super Bowl Sunday, and the next great retail opportunity, Valentine's Day. But for the most part, New Englanders tend to hunker down to stay warm during the winter and wait until Easter and the opening day of the Red Sox season!

I

The church, however, has a different agenda, for the church is called to keep alive a story that makes a huge difference in the world. In this season we retell the story of Jesus. The church is the repository of this extraordinary story, and it is a treasure to be told again and again. Why? Because it is a story that transforms lives and cultures. We retell it every year by shining a light on it from the perspective of what is happening each year, and each year it reveals new truths and new perspectives on the life we live together.

There is relatively little we know about the childhood and youth of Jesus. In our four gospels we have only one account of his childhood, and it is

¹ ©Thomas R. McKibbens, January 8, 2012.

a story of a precocious child of twelve on what had to be an exciting trip to Jerusalem. We are told that when his parents left to return to Nazareth, he stayed behind to talk with the scholars in the temple. His parents, of course, figured he was playing with all the other children on the journey, until they discover to their horror that their child is missing. They rush back to Jerusalem for a frantic search, and they finally find him in the temple, when he looks up at his parents and makes the famous statement: *Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?* Those of us who are parents have no trouble sensing both the relief and frustration they must have felt when they found him.

We are well aware that there are other gospels that didn't make it into our Bible. We call them "apocryphal" gospels (meaning "hidden," not widely accepted). They have tried to fill the gap of silence about those youthful years of Jesus. They tell sometimes wild, fanciful tales about the young Jesus—tales that make him look like a cartoon character rather than a real boy. He is pictured as a supernatural wizard who combined magical powers with boyhood mischief. We can be relieved that the early church recognized these stories as fanciful and refused to include those apocryphal gospels in our scripture.

II

What we do have is Mark's no-nonsense opening of his gospel, an opening that pictures Jesus at the age of thirty, the traditional age of spiritual leadership in his Jewish culture. His story pictures John the Baptizer, the back-to-nature, anti-establishment cousin of Jesus, standing waist-deep in the Jordan River baptizing people. Then out from the crowd steps Jesus, and surely John must have recognized him immediately. Maybe they had played together as children. Certainly they knew each other from holiday visits, as their mothers Mary and Elizabeth talked in the kitchen. Mark's gospel does not reveal the little family argument that we get in the other gospels about who should baptize whom. Like two relatives in a restaurant arguing over who takes the check, Jesus finally won and insisted that John baptize him!

But one thing stands out in this story: just as he was coming up out of the water, something extraordinary happened, something so powerful that it changed the course of his whole life. The text says, *...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."*

The heavens *torn apart* is such an evocative phrase. Torn apart! Ripped open! It is a violent verb. This same verb is used later in the story of the crucifixion of Jesus, when the temple curtain is described as *torn in two from*

*top to bottom.*² But here it refers to the sky, the heavens, as though God is in a great hurry. This implies urgency. It is crucial, momentous!

The heavens are torn apart, and the story says that God sends a messenger to Jesus in the form of a dove, the great universal symbol of peace and hope that goes all the way back to the story of Noah. Remember? Noah opens the window of the ark and sends out a dove. After all the months of terrible flooding, the dove returns, and we get this remarkable phrase: *there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf...*³ And from that story, the world has thought of the dove and the olive leaf as symbols of peace and hope!

Now in the waters of the Jordan River, we see the dove again, but instead of an olive leaf, we hear a voice: *You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.* Now a question: who saw this vision? Who saw the heavens torn open, and the dove descending to his shoulder, and who heard the voice from heaven? Look closely at the text and you will see that only Jesus saw it; only Jesus heard the voice. The rest of the crowd standing on the riverbank saw only an eccentric John the Baptizer doing what he had done hundreds of times before. They saw Jesus coming up out of the water to make room for the next person to be baptized.

² Mark 15: 38.

³ Genesis 8: 11.

That is to say, this was a deeply personal religious experience that Jesus later described to his followers. It was something that only he saw and experienced; something that could not be described in any words other than by using these deeply held religious symbols of the coming of the dove and the voice from above. This was a turning point in his life, when he realized with perfect clarity that God had a special place for him, a special calling, a special mission.

III

Now with that story in mind, I want to refer you to a scene in a movie that many of you will remember. It is a baptism scene in Robert Duvall's movie, *Tender Mercies*. Duvall plays Mac, a down-on-his-luck country songwriter who battles the bottle. He fights back with the help of a young widow who offers him room and board at her roadside Texas motel in exchange for handyman help. Her name is appropriately Grace, and she finds a toehold in Mac's life, and eventually Mac and the widow's young son Sonny, make the decision to be baptized.

Driving home after their baptisms, Sonny says to Mac: "Well, we done it, Mac; we was baptized." Peering into the old truck's rearview mirror, Sonny studies himself for a moment. "Everybody said I'd feel like a changed person.

Do you feel like a changed person?” “Not yet,” says Mac. “You don’t look any different, Mac. Do you think I look any different?” “Not yet,” answers Mac.

Like Mac and Sonny in the movie, we may not always look in the mirror and see ourselves as changed people. But the truth is that when we made the decision to follow Christ and were baptized, something happened to us when we came up out of the water. Or, if you are among those who experienced confirmation after being baptized as an infant, something happened to you at confirmation. You may not realize it, and you may not see it when you look in the mirror; but your baptism places a spiritual watermark on your life.

That watermark identifies you as authentic. It is a reminder that you are God’s child, and you are loved by God. It is a reminder that you, too, have a calling and a mission, and your life is not just to float aimlessly in the sea of life being moved wherever the tide takes you. You have a watermark! You have purpose! You have a calling!

And like a watermark, the image of Christ stamped into your life guarantees that you are authentic. You are not a counterfeit; you are the real thing. And as the real thing, our calling is to live into the implications of our baptism. The season of Epiphany holds the light behind our lives and reveals the watermark. And the living Christ says clearly to us as individuals and as a church: “That is who you really are! You are my people! Wash off the old

dirt; shake the dust from your feet; God has something new and exciting for you! Come, walk with me into the light of a new day.”

IV

And as a company of extraordinary people, we come up out of the water to follow Christ wherever he will lead us. And when that happens, God looks at us and says, “You are my child, and I am very pleased.”