

A New Year's Journey
Mark 1:4-11
A Sermon by Heather Kattan
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Every January our culture abounds with ideas about starting fresh and ending bad habits. But now that we are eleven days into the New Year many of our resolutions have fallen by the wayside, and many of us have ceased to make resolutions because we know that they will not be kept. I pledged for a few years to become more organized and to give up sweets, but neither of those promises lasted for very long. As we get back into the mundane daily routines following the excitement of the holidays we often lose that sense of adventure and fall back into our daily patterns. But before we do that this time around let us look to the immense challenge and trusting step that Jesus took in coming to be baptized. The gospels provide us with little information of the time between Jesus' birth and His arrival before John for baptism. We can only assume that Mary and Joseph were doing their best to give Jesus the closest they could to the traditional upbringing of a Jewish carpenter's son. It was not until this moment in the Jordan River that the ministry of Jesus to the world was ready to begin. This step would move Jesus away from the life and family that He knew and into a world that was not, and still is not, fully ready for the revelations that He was bringing. As we can see from Mark's later account of Jesus' character at the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus knew and acknowledged the serious consequences of His decisions to follow God's will and set Himself apart from ordinary human beings. Ultimately, Jesus' strength to dare to do something new resonates for us as we begin this New Year.

As we get into this account from The Gospel According to Mark the question instantly arises of why Jesus would come to be baptized. In verse four we hear that John

the Baptist is giving baptism as a way of repentance and forgiveness of sins. And yet in verse nine Jesus, who is to be the one without sin, presents Himself to John to be baptized in the Jordan River. If He had no sins, then why did Jesus feel the need to participate in the sacrament of baptism? Jesus comes here to be baptized for the same reason that a little over two weeks ago we celebrated His birth in a manger. The incarnation of Jesus in flesh was to bring humanity closer to God, and to do that Jesus leads us by participating in all aspects of humanity. There is no glossing over the fact that while being fully divine, Jesus is also fully human. His journey is a model for our journey, and because on one level it is a human journey we can also look for lessons on how our relationship with God ought to develop. Jesus' baptism signaled a break with His human family and the traditional life that other men would lead, and the beginning of a life of ministry to the people. He offers himself up to God's will and takes the path that God is calling for Him to take.

As it was Jesus' obedience to the will of His father that led Him to the Jordan river to be baptized by John, so we too are led by God's will in our lives to make the choice to be baptized into the Christian family. We are all faced with the moment of choice as to what direction our lives will take. Our baptism, as Jesus' was, is an outward expression of the inner call of God on our lives; our way of saying "yes" to the salvation that is being offered. This act in our lives represents at once the end of a journey and the beginning of another, the sort of major crossroads of life. I can remember my own baptism from when I was a teenager, but there are many things that have happened to me since that time. I am a different person than I was those years ago. The emotions and excitement of being plunged under water and then being brought up again into the

welcoming arms of my church fellowship have become a wonderful memory. After stepping out of the baptismal area, I found myself on a life long journey to make my faith integral to every aspect of my everyday life. I am not at the same place that I was when I came to be baptized and I do not wish to return to that place. Jesus did not remain standing in the Jordan, and neither will I remain limited by the past comfortable explorations of my faith. The world changes and causes us constantly to evolve and adapt to new situations. We cannot stop our bodies from aging or our children from growing up. However, this forced change does not stop us from sometimes seeking to remain in a comfortable place longer than we need too. As well, in our faith we often remain caught up in a comfortable place or relationship with God because we do not want to take the chance of what the next step might bring.

Whenever I think of taking risks of faith I am always reminded of the last of the Indiana Jones movies where there is a part where Indiana has to pass a series of tests to get to the Holy Grail. The most memorable one for me was when he needed to cross from one side of a ravine to the other. In order to do so he must step out onto an invisible bridge as a test of faith. Being a Hollywood movie, Indiana Jones passes the test with humor and excitement. I doubt, however, that I would be so brave as to literally step out onto an invisible bridge. I would want some way to test that there was something there to catch me when I went over the edge. My scene would play out with me clinging to the edge while I tested the stability of the bridge with one foot, with my other securely on land that I could see. It is the real challenge for our faith to be able to trust God so much that we can take the step out into the unknown knowing that God is there with us on the journey to the other side. Jesus stepped into that river and God said, ð You are my Son,

the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.ö He then went on to minister to the world; showing us the way to become closer to His Father in heaven.

The journey through life often seems like we are walking on a path through a wooded forest, sometimes more densely covered than others. And as is often the case both literally and figuratively, paths through the woods often have many forks and twists. When we face these twists in our lives it is our choices that will shape our character and who we really are. We can turn back and head to a place that we know or we can take a chance on a new path where we cannot necessarily see clearly where it goes. God is gently leading us to the place that we need to go with our lives, but we need to say yes to walking forward in our lives and deepening our relationship with God. At times we are going to be called to step out from what is known and comfortable. God calls us to forgive each other and love our neighbor as ourselves, but our culture often focuses on revenge and blame and self-preservation. Being the people that God calls us to be, being true Christians transformed by the power of Christ in our lives, means that we are not always going to fit with the popular mould. People will begin to notice that we are different, and we need to overcome our fear of being different and learn to risk our own comfort to follow God's will. I am not telling you that it will be easy, stability and popularity are much easier, but it is what being a Christian means. Calling ourselves Christian must mean that we have a transformative relationship with Jesus.

Relationships are about growth and becoming closer to each other, which often means a journey of new experiences. Jesus left the life that He had known as a carpenter's son to pursue the path of obedience to God. In many other of our scriptural stories like those of Abraham, Jacob, Peter, and Paul, God calls these people to go out

from their established lives to come closer to where God was leading them to be. What if Peter had said no and remained a fisherman? What if Paul had not responded to Christ's call? What if we say no because the new path does not fit into our conception of the way that things ought to be? Endlessly holding on to where we are or even who we think someone is prevents us from seeing the possibilities of where letting go might take us.

In all of our lives we will probably meet both people who are constantly growing and those who are stuck in one place. We have all heard of Mother Teresa and her work in the slums of Calcutta. She was born an ordinary human being, and like any person she had to choose to do these good works. When Mother Teresa was twelve she felt the call of God to become a missionary and spread the love of Christ. She left her home in Macedonia to join an order that was doing work in India and through this experience she discovered her call to work with the poor and outcast in the area. Each step in her life was meant to bring her into closer relationship with God, and the way that she saw God was directly related to the choices that she made in her life. She was once quoted as saying, "I see God in every human being. When I wash the leper's wounds I feel I am nursing the Lord himself. Is it not a beautiful experience?"¹ Mother Teresa took on the challenges that God presented to her in order to get her to this place of being at peace within her relationship with God. Even though her journey was surely difficult at some points, Mother Teresa consistently said "yes" to what God was calling her to do. And it is not only Biblical figures or famous personalities who are challenged by God to step in a new direction on their life journey. God is constantly pulling us towards a deeper relationship through challenges that open us up to the divine love and grace. Perhaps our challenges will be in starting a new job or reaching out to the marginalized in our community. There

¹ <http://www.dailycelebrations.com/beauty.htm>

are many places in our lives where we can do the work of God in a world that is often more focused on materialistic ends. There are also many ways that we can say no to the path that God is calling us to take. It is at these moments that we need to recall the courage of Jesus in obediently following God's will. His journey to and after His baptism in the Jordan reminds us that our life of faith is one of constant growth and accepting the chances that God calls us to take.

In the end, we must see our faith lives as a journey that does not end with our baptism, but rather continues throughout our lives. We cannot force ourselves to stay in one place or limit our relationship that we have with God to where we feel the most comfortable. It is easy to want to keep control over what is happening in our lives and relationships, however, striving to remain where we are safe and comfortable can cause us to miss a new and more beneficial place in our spiritual life. Jesus knew that after He was anointed by the Holy Spirit at the river Jordan that nothing would be the same. He had to journey out and minister to a world that was not always receptive and most times did not understand what He was teaching. Yet He had the courage to set out upon His mission in the world because Jesus knew that His father and the Spirit would always be with Him. We also should follow the example of Jesus and venture out into the unknown in our own faith journeys. It will not always be easy and smooth, as there will be dark nights and frustrations, but we must go through these challenges if we are to discover new understanding of God. A little while ago I heard a wonderful quotation attributed to Helen Keller, it states, "Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure or nothing." Our call is to

seek for God in our lives rather than seeking lives of quiet comfort. We must be ready for the call to venture out in a new direction. It may not be easy, after all, the unknown can be frightening, but with faith and prayer I believe that we can all answer the calls that God gives us.

Join with me in prayer! Dear Lord, help us to hear Your direction and guidance for us in this world. Give us the courage to follow your will even if we do not immediately understand Your purpose. And help us to emulate the model that You provided in the incarnation of Your son, Jesus Christ. Let us always listen for Your word with open hearts and minds. Amen.