Genesis 1:1-5

Mark 1:4-11

*Water Blessings*

There – at the beginning – when all was chaos, God was in the wind that moved over the face of everything – and creation – out of the formless void God swept over the face of the waters. And how many times in our faith history has water been an essential part of the story? God’s tool even? From the waters of the flood to purge the earth of evil – to the parting of the Red Sea so the Israelites could pursue a new life, away from enslavement. And Jesus, like all of us, was nurtured in the waters of the womb – Mary’s womb. Then Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan – the time and place where he was named and claimed as God’s own – beloved and chosen. And then it is water – living water Jesus gives to the woman at the well so she can know new life; water that is changed to wine as a sign of God’s new life at the wedding in Cana; water that Jesus uses to wash the disciple’s feet as he shows them what their ministry will be like. Water – making new – claiming and renewing.

And there was John – distinctive character that he was, wearing camel’s hair and a leather belt looking for all the world like Elijah – out in the wilderness calling people to repent - to turn around – to begin anew – and to be baptized as a sign of their commitment to that newness. The way the gospel writer, Mark, tells the story it would seem John wasn’t really ready when Jesus came to him to be baptized. Did John hear God’s recognition of Jesus as “my beloved Son” and note the heavens being “torn open”? Did he see the Spirit descending like a dove on Jesus? Or was all that for Jesus alone?

Baptism – new life and new beginnings – forgiveness of sins – a turning around – but it’s more too; it’s a putting on of something new. For Jesus, at least in the Gospels – baptism marks the beginning of his ministry. From this point on Jesus is driven into the wilderness by the Spirit where he faces temptations and wild beasts, and from there he begins his work. I’ve often wondered if baptism, described here as such a powerful event, is such an empowering event in our lives. Do we remember our baptisms, or if we were baptized as infants or young children, does someone help us remember? In some traditions, where infants are baptized, a significant adult is assigned to that child as ‘godparent’ or sponsor, and it is the responsibility of that adult to remind the child of their baptism and what it means. One godparent I know, remembers the anniversary of her godchild’s baptism as faithfully as she does her birthday – with a reminder that it was in this date she was made part of the family of God.

An image that sticks with me is from the movie *Tender Mercies* -from a few years back. In the movie, Robert Duvall plays a kind of alcoholic drifter named Mac, and with the encouragement of a young widow, he fights his way back to trying to be a better person. One day, Mac and the woman’s young son have gone to one of those revival-type events and they decide to be baptized. On the way home, Mac comments to the boy that everyone had told him once he was baptized, he’d feel like a changed person. So, he asks, “Do you feel like a changed person?” The son replies, “Not yet. You don’t look any different. Do I look any different?” “Not yet,” answers Mac.

I wonder, what do we expect from baptism? Do we remember our baptism? There are so many variations – infant or adult (confession of faith), sprinkling, pouring or total immersion, inside or in the out-of-doors. I do remember my own baptism – at Central Christian Church right here in Salt Lake City. I was about 11 years old. A lot of it was brought back to mind by Heather Murray Elkins telling a gathering of clergy of her own baptism. (There were a few differences though, one being Heather is about 5’ 11”) As Heather spoke to us about her ministry, she had most of us laughing heartily. I believe Heather is from West Virginia and from a more conservative tradition that held to baptism by immersion. The church her family was part of was a small rural church where there was sometimes a minister and sometimes the worship was lay-led, and the ministers could vary. But if they had something important like their quarterly communion, or a baptism or wedding – a *real* pastor was dispatched. Well, both Heather and her sister (also substantially built like Heather) were to be baptized on a set Sunday, and they awaited the arrival of the pastor. When he arrived, Heather said he looked to be about 5’2” and about 80 years old. When she and her sister entered the baptistry of their little church – all dressed in their white baptismal gowns -the two of them towered over this man – and when he spoke the words about dying to their old life – he reached up and tipped her back into the water. She knew he was supposed to be saying something like, ‘and rising to new life in Christ’ but as she remained under water she thought she would really drown instead because she wasn’t sure this little old man could accomplish that last part. After being underwater for what seemed like an eternity, he finally managed the new life part. And she added, “now we have been sealed with the *Imago Christi* – a permanent tattoo – and nothing showed.

This seemingly innocent sign – our baptism – may not show. It is one of the two sacraments of our faith, a sacrament we believe is efficacious (God’s grace imparted in this covenant) in only one application, and yet I believe its power is often taken too lightly. We say ‘yes’ to baptism knowing that by baptism we become part of the “family of faith” – an increasingly diverse family that extends well beyond the walls of this place; and we say ‘yes’ to baptism wanting to be part of the new life Christ offers. But saying ‘yes’ to baptism is also saying yes to some challenges: ‘yes’ to being in solidarity with those whom Jesus came to serve – ‘yes’ to serving the poor and ministering to those in pain and despair; and ‘yes’ to not always being the voice of the majority – ‘yes’ to seeking justice in our world and working for peace – a peace that is grounded in divine hope and not in easy solutions or power politics; and ‘yes’ to action and not just quiet believing. So do we need to hang out a warning sign that says something like – these waters can be dangerous; they may lead you to places you never thought you’d go. Don’t take baptism lightly – but when you are baptized, we welcome you and celebrate your decision to seek day by day to join with us in our journey of seeking to follow Christ’s way and living up to God’s claim on our lives – for we too are God’s beloved.