

Who is Thomas? Mark 1:4-11

Saint Marks United Methodist Church, Charleston, WV Baptism of the Lord (January 8) 2012

Mark 1:4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, "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. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

In today's Gospel lesson, we read about how John the Baptizer was doing a popular Jewish custom: baptizing people, as symbolic of their sins being washed away, as they make a commitment to better follow their commandments from God, as Jews.

There is certainly nothing said about Jesus having any sins to be washed away in any of the Gospel baptism stories. Indeed, in Matthew's Gospel, John argues with Jesus that he (John) should not baptize Jesus, but should be baptized by Jesus.

No, in none of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' Baptism (and it is missing in John's Gospel) is there any reference to Jesus needing to have His sins forgiven. What I find so very strange is that while Christian denominations argue more about Baptism than perhaps any other doctrine or ritual (should it be infants or just adults or teenagers of the age of discernment? should it be dunking, immersion, sprinkling???) the Gospel accounts of Jesus' own Baptism doesn't deal with this at all. Rather, **the focus in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke** (as we see from today's reading) **is on what happens immediately AFTER Jesus is baptized:**

The heavens open. The Holy Spirit appears. A Voice from Heaven declares.

This scripture, and the story I frequently tell about a disadvantaged young woman from Nashville named Fayette, have formed a bedrock of how we understand the Good News of Jesus, here at Saint Marks.

Each Sunday morning, you are invited to remember your Baptism, and more particularly your Baptism NAME: *“Beloved Child of God, precious and beautiful to behold.”*

To review briefly the theology:

- (1) Jesus had no sins to be forgiven.
- (2) John recognized this and tried to prohibit Jesus from being baptized – because John the Baptist ONLY understood Baptism as a ritual cleansing from sins.
- (3) Jesus insisted that John baptize Him “in order to fulfill all righteousness” (the words of Matthew’s Gospel).
- (4) Jesus forever changed the meaning of CHRISTIAN BAPTISM from the mere Jewish ritual of cleansing. It is where we, like Christ, Whose Name we claim, also are given a new name, like the one announced from Heaven on the day Jesus was baptized.
- (5) We remember that we are beloved by God, and we are restored in our Baptism to the image in which we were created – in the image of God, precious and beautiful to behold
- (6) Christian Baptism is about a new righteousness. It’s not about sin and forgiveness as much as about Name, Identity, and Relationship/Belonging.

That whole theology shapes much of the Good News we celebrate and practice in the Name of Jesus in this Church.

Today, I want to give you the next chapter.

Indeed, in Baptism more than in any other ritual of the Church, do we claim what Irenaeus taught back in the 3d century happened *in the Incarnation, in the birth of God as human: God became human so that we humans can become like God [in whose image we were created.]*

Today, we are going to look at the next chapter of the meaning of Baptism.

I want to recall for you an old Jewish teaching from the Talmud, that I first preached about on Christmas Eve three years ago. This Talmudic teaching goes back to about the time of the First Testament prophet Isaiah.

In this Talmudic wisdom, there is the teaching about the LAMED VOV. The LAMED VOV are people in whom God's Light of Righteousness has been planted. They are good, kind people, who are compassionate and suffering for the people of the world.

There are 36 of these Lamed Vov people in the world, at any given time. Actually the term "Lamed Vov" is Hebrew for the number "36."

There are some interesting facts about these Lamed Vov. (1) None of them know that they are in this "Elect of 36."

(2) Much like how Abraham dickered with God to not destroy Sodom if there were just ten righteous people, the Teaching of the LAMED VOV is that God will not allow evil in the world to prevail nor overcome the world, so long as there are these 36 people alive.

(3) Indeed, the Messiah will one day come, and will be one of the Lamed Vov.

But, if ever there are less than 36 such righteous people in the world, then the world is subject to total destruction.

Now, with that teaching in mind about the Lamed Vov, let me tell you a story:

There was a famous monastery which had fallen on very hard times. Its many buildings had, in years gone by, been filled with many monks – young and old – the sounds of whose chants had filled the large nave of the cathedral. People from everywhere had come to worship, because they had felt a special touching by the Presence of God in that place.

But now – now, there were just a handful of monks, most of them getting quite on in years, and it was a rare occasion when anyone from outside the monastery came to worship. And the monks continued their daily routine of prayer and praise, but it all seemed to be done with a heavy heart.

On the edge of the monastery woods, an old rabbi had built a little hut. He would come there from time to time to pray and to fast. No one ever spoke with him, but whenever he appeared, the word would be passed from monk to monk: “The rabbi walks in the woods.” And, although the rabbi was not a Christian, for as long as he was there, the monks would feel sustained by his prayerful presence.

One day the abbot of the monastery decided to visit the rabbi and to open his heart to him. So, after morning Eucharist, he set out for the rabbi’s hut. As he approached, he saw the rabbi standing in the doorway, his arms outstretched in welcome – as though he had been waiting for some time. The rabbi and the abbot embraced like long-lost brothers, smiling with smiles their faces could barely contain.

After awhile the rabbi motioned the abbot to enter. In the middle of the room was a wooden table with the scriptures open on it. The rabbi said, “You and your brothers are serving God with heavy hearts. You have come for a teaching from me. ... I will give you a teaching, but you can only repeat it once. After that, no one must ever say it aloud again” The abbot silently nodded his agreement.

The rabbi told the abbot, “The Messiah is among you.”

After a long period of silence, the rabbi finally said, “Now you must go.”

The abbot left without a word, and never looked back.

The next morning, the abbot called his monks together and told them he had received a teaching from “the old rabbi who walks in the woods,” and that the teaching was never again to be spoken aloud, once he shared it this once with the monks.

Then he looked at each one of the monks, and said, “The rabbi said that one of us is the Messiah.”

The monks were startled by this saying, “What could it mean? Is Brother John the Messiah? Is it Father Matthew? Or Brother Thomas? Am I the Messiah?” were questions that ran through each of their minds.

They were all deeply puzzled by the rabbi's teaching, but no one ever mentioned it again.

As time went by, the monks began to treat one another with a very special reverence. There was a gentle, wholehearted, human quality about them now which was hard to describe – but easy to notice. They lived with one another as men who had finally found something.

They prayed together the scriptures as those who were deeply inspired. The occasional visitor could not help but be deeply moved by the spirit that they found in that place.

Before long, people were coming from far and wide to be nourished by the prayer life of the monks. Once more, young men were asking to become a part of the monastery community.

In those days, the rabbi no longer walked in the woods. His hut had fallen into ruins. But, somehow or other, the old monks who had taken his teaching to heart still felt sustained by his prayerful presence.¹

They didn't know who it was, so they started treating everyone like it might be him.

The wonder of the teaching of the Lamed Vov is that because no one knew who they were, and because the fate of the world depended on their continued existence, you always had to treat everyone as though they might be a Lamed Vovnik.

Let me switch gears, just once more – for the last time in today's sermon.

How many of you remember reading about THOMAS THE DISCIPLE. He's often referred to as _____[Doubting]_____ Thomas.

We are told in the Gospel of John that his name was **Thomas, also called the twin**. An interesting detail, since nowhere in the Bible does it ever say who was his twin sibling.

What if Thomas' twin had been Jesus?

Oh, no, preacher. Jesus had no twin. There wasn't room in the manger for two. Nothing in scripture tells us about any such twin. You're just making this all up.

In His Baptism, Jesus was named Beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold.

In our Baptism, we are given that same Baptismal name. **We are – in our Baptism – remade, renamed, restored to our created image: in the Image of God.**

The **Glory of our Baptism** is that we are **given the chance to be Jesus' twin.**

We ... can be ... Thomas.

But – and this is where Chapter 2 of the Baptism Story takes us:

If we can be Jesus' twin – a beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold – who else?

- ✦ When the monks began to believe that they might be looking at the Messiah, it changed how they treated people.
- ✦ When people realized the importance of the Lamed Vov – and how anyone could be one of the 36 – they treated each person as though she or he were one of them – for the preservation of the world.

Same theory. Same result.

If we not only accept that **WE are a beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold – Jesus' twin** ... just think ***what a difference it would make*** if we ***started looking at other people as though they, too*** were **just as beloved, just as precious, just as beautiful.**

What if they, too, are Thomas – Jesus' twin. Remember your Baptism. And be on the lookout.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

¹ Excerpted from William J. Bausch, *Storytelling – Imagination and Faith* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-third Publications, 1984) 138-40.