

⁴John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 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 when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

As I hear the Gospel read today, I reflect on what it was that brought Jesus to the Jordan River, without sin, to be baptized, along with the rest of the people who came to John the Baptizer. But I cannot stop here, with a picture of a group of people gathered around a Palestinian River 2,000 years ago. That which happened on that day is still going on with each one of us today. **Sin** -- today as back then -- **is the refusal of God's Power to change our lives.** This is not some fancy theology language. This is the daily stuff of my life – real, personal, concrete, close at hand.

Once upon a time, there was a lion who was so insecure that he wanted to make sure that all the other animals knew he was king of the jungle. He was so confident that he bypassed the smaller animals and went straight to the bear. "Who is king of the jungle?" the lion demanded. The bear replied, "Why, you are, of course." The lion gave a mighty roar of approval.

Next, he went to the tiger. "Who is the king of the jungle?" he roared? The tiger quickly responded, "Everyone knows that you are, O mighty lion." The lion swelled with pride.

Next on the list was the elephant. The lion faced the elephant and leveled his question. "Who is the king of the jungle?" he challenged. The elephant grabbed the lion with his trunk, whirled him around in the air five or six times, and slammed him against a tree. Then he pounded him on the

ground several times, sat on him once, dipped him in the lake, and dumped him out on the mud.

The lion, battered and bruised, struggled to his feet, peered at the elephant through his good eye, and said, "Look, just because you don't know the answer is no reason to get mean about it."

When we don't let the Jesus story take hold of us and save us from ourselves, then the Jesus story leaves us blind, and ends up getting us hurt.

When we take the Jesus story and just turn it into some tame little story that says, "Play nice with each other," instead of allowing it to save our lives from all that attempts to make us worthless, then we are left deaf, blind, and hurt.

But today's Gospel lesson is NOT TAME LIKE THAT.

If we think of Jesus being baptized along with this pleasant little white bird fluttering down, then we miss what Mark was telling us. **GOD RIPPED OPEN THE HEAVENS!**

Think of what happened in today's Scripture lesson like this.

Several management types were at the River Jordan as the crowds came to John. They decided that they needed to get things organized. So they set up tables and began to give tags to everyone coming for repentance. On each tag was written the person's name and chief sin.

Bob walked up to the table. The organizer wrote his name on the tag and then asked, *What's your most awful sin, Bob?*

I stole some money from my boss.

The person at the table takes a marker and writes in **BIG BOLD LETTERS: EMBEZZLER** and slaps it on Bob's chest.

Next

The next person comes forward. *Name?*

Mary

Mary, what's your most awful sin? *I gossiped about some people. It wasn't very much, but I didn't like those people.*

The organizer wrote **MARY -- SLANDERER** and slap it on her.

Next -- Name?

George

What's your most awful sin, George?

I've thought about how nice it would be to have my neighbor's

Corvette.

GEORGE -- COVETER

OK, who's next? What's your name?

Gordon.

What's your sin?

I had an affair.

GORDON -- ADULTERER

And on, and on, the process continues.

Then along comes Jesus. He walks past the organizers and walks down the line of all those waiting to be baptized. He asks each of them for their SIN TAGS. One by one, He takes those tags off the people and sticks them on His Own Body. He goes to John, and as He is baptized, the river washes away the ink from each name tag He wears.

Do you still wear a name tag with your sin on it?

You know what sin is, don't you? SIN IS THAT WHICH SEPARATES US FROM GOD. It keeps us from experiencing the power of God in our lives.

Sometimes our sin is the result of what has been done to us.

Sometimes, **our only involvement is that we** **STILL CLING TO IT** -- won't allow God's power to turn us free from it.

Here's another story that helps explain the reality of how it works.

There had been a conference where a bunch of preachers gathered to think and talk about Baptism. At the closing exercise, they each took their turn explaining what it meant their own Baptism meant. It went fine -- each person sharing what they had gained from their time together at the conference.

Until -- one young pastor just threw a fly into the ointment of good feeling that was present in the room. He came forward and sat down -- it was his turn. Everyone waits. SILENCE. Everyone waits MORE SILENCE. They are starting to get impatient, like most Christians today get impatient when SILENCE BEGINS TO EXPRESS ITSELF. Chairs began to creak; throats were cleared; watches were consulted around the circle.

Finally the young man shifts his gaze from his hands to some spot above their heads.

I've been looking for my name in everything you have said in this conference. But nobody has said my name; it's not there.

What does he mean, *Not there.* ??

It's not that I don't want one of those wonderful names I have heard you claim. The problem is that they just aren't strong enough. PAUSE There's none strong enough to undo the one I already have. My father gave it to me. OVER AND OVER. My name is ... his gaze shifts down to his fingers.

My name is NOT GOOD ENOUGH.

There is a deep silence deep enough to drown in. Tears rise.

All the ministers present sit and look on helplessly from the shoreline of this river of grief -- this confession of inadequacy. In a room full of lifeguards, this minister has revealed that he is drowning.

Then there comes a stir -- as one, then two, then three, and then more men and women rise from their chairs and move over to form a circle around him -- and they touch him. The one voice says simply YOU ARE MY BELOVED SON. WITH YOU I AM WELL PLEASED. And then they all join in unison to repeat these words that Jesus made possible for each baptized person to hear in his or her own ears. YOU ARE MY BELOVED CHILD. WITH YOU I AM WELL PLEASED.

Then the person who organized this preachers' conference, who told me the story, asked the man "*What difference will this make?*"

And he said: "I don't know. Something, and he touched his chest -- something in here that was broken is fixed. Now, whenever I put my hand in the water, I will remember."

Our sin is sometimes the bad choices we have made.

Sometimes our sin that separates us from the power of God is our unwillingness to take the sins of others that have hurt us and turn them over to God and to accept the truth that **WE ARE GOD'S CHILD AND WHATEVER SIN TAG WE CARRY, GOD'S POWER WIPES IT AWAY. WE ARE BELOVED.**

In verse 10, Marks describes the heavens being torn apart. He uses the same words one other time – in Chapter 15, Verse 38, where Mark describes what happens in the temple while Jesus is being crucified. He uses the same word to describe how the curtain in the Temple was torn apart. That was the curtain which under Jewish law separated the sinful people from the holy of holies.

In His Baptism, as in His death – Jesus was working to set aside out sin – to tear apart the barrier between us and God.

When we are baptized, God tells us that He loves us, and He is willing to separate anything AND EVERYthing that separates us from God's power.

Here at Saint Marks United Methodist Church, we have people who wear a little silicone wrist band to remember the power of Baptism. **REMEMBER YOUR BAPTISM; YOU ARE A BELOVED CHILD OF GOD, PRECIOUS AND BEAUTIFUL TO BEHOLD.**

This is God's Power, in Baptism. If you have been baptized one time, you never need to have it done again. God's power does not fail, even if we try to not let it work within us.

If you do not have on of these silicone wrist bands, I invite you to receive one when you come forward to receive Holy Communion. If you have never been baptized, I invite you to talk to me about how it works, after our time together this evening.

This is the Gospel – the good news.

AMEN.