

“The Nativity According to Mark” / Mark 1:4-11 / 11 January 2015

Oh, these words have haunted me. For years, they've haunted me. We read this passage just a few weeks ago in Advent, and we read it again today. But truly, I don't need to have the text in front of me, for these words have been lilted through my heart for years. I have them completely memorized in the old Revised Standard Version. I've puzzled over them, meditated on them, prayed them. I know that's weird, but I have. I'm captivated by the baptism of Jesus, this event that has alternately embarrassed and bored the church for two millennia. We rarely think of it, but the baptism of Jesus was the turning point of his life. Everything that comes later, the life-giving, world-changing words, the Sermon on the Mount, the Upper Room, the Cross—all of it hinges on this moment, when a humble man has a choice to make: Does he remain Jesus-the-Carpenter, or does he step into the water, step into the water, and emerge as the Christ? How different might our world look today if Jesus of Nazareth had dipped his toe in the chilly Jordan, shaken his head slowly, and trudged back up the hill and home to peaceful Galilee, there to live his life quietly and die his death painlessly? If Jesus had never become the Christ in the waters of the Jordan, what might your life be?

Well, just think about all the lives you never got to live! Think of all the selves you never did become. Think for a moment about the person you almost were, once...the person—now—whom you can never be. What if you had followed that stranger's advice and majored in something else altogether? What if you had married that long-ago lover, or given up on your marriage when you went through that rough patch? What if you had said those words you were sorely tempted to say when you had the chance? When some good soul held a mirror up to your face, and you didn't like what you saw, what if you'd said, “I don't need your meddling,” and turned away unrepentant? What if you really had “sold the house, bought a ticket to the West Coast and given them a standup routine in LA”? Whom would you be if you'd never stopped drinking, if you'd followed that half-forgotten dream, if your garage band had caught the attention of *Rolling Stone*? So many lives un-lived! So many dreams unpursued! Perhaps so many nightmares avoided! It's probably fruitless to ponder all these questions in such a vague way, but instead, ask yourself this: What was the big turning-point moment in your life? What was it? The choice of a career, a marriage, a move to some other place, a total makeover? And what might your life be today if you had not chosen the direction that you chose?

Many years ago, I was engaged to a woman who knew all the lines in that old film *Rambo: First Blood*. She honestly knew every single word spoken by each character. She was a Latin-Mass-Catholic who truly would have liked to put an end to religious freedom for others. She had many fine qualities, too. No line from Tennyson or Mary Oliver was ever wasted on her. She could use words that you'd seen in books and never heard spoken. But on the whole, it wouldn't have worked out between us. The Latin Mass and Rambo were just insurmountable. What might life have been if not for the one courageous friend who told me how foolish I was being? Where would I be today if I'd insisted on going through with that engagement? Well, I wouldn't be pastor. I'd either be a reluctant Latin-Mass-Catholic or I'd be divorced. I might be an English teacher or a copy editor for some big textbook company in the Midwest. There would have been no seminary, no Michelle, no Bower Hill Church for me. My current family would never have been—including two little lives that I can't imagine the world without. Ah, transformation! Thank God I changed courses!

And there's Jesus on the banks of the River Jordan. Fame has not yet claimed him. He's still free to drift quietly through his handful of years, if he should choose it, and disappear from all memory. He could lead a relatively painless life of private sorrows and joys. Look at Jesus on the banks of the Jordan, deciding whether to wade out and plunge himself into that river of change! It's the age-old truth, whether for Jesus or for you and me: If you don't change directions, you just might end up where you're going, which in Jesus' case wasn't much of anywhere. But into your life and into mine, as into his, there comes that silent moment on the banks of the Jordan. There comes into each of our lives a moment when we must choose: do we go on as we are, or do we step down into the water...and change? Waters of change, waters of cleansing, waters of death and life! Transformation! Surely, all the life of faith and all the teachings of Christ come down to this one thing: transformation! Metamorphosis, the new creation, rebirth! There are as many words for it as there are variations on how it looks when it happens! The life of faith is about healing, growth, change. Resurrection! Change of heart, change in the individual and in the world! So step into the water, Jesus. Step into the water, for its muddy currents will bear you all the way to Jerusalem, to Gethsemane, to the empty tomb. Step into the water, Jesus the Galilean, and in ages to come cathedrals will be built to your glory and in your name. Step into the water, and this old world will never be the same. What if he hadn't? For surely the thing that was true for Jesus, perhaps the most influential personality in human history, is also true for each person who finds himself or herself confronted with the opportunity to be transformed in beautiful and healthful ways: if we say "no," then we've refused a thing of grace and beauty not to ourselves alone but to all the world that God wishes to bless through us. Ah, step into the water, Jesus, for all who have been claimed by love must share it!

This is the nativity story according to Mark. Of course, Mark doesn't give us angels, or shepherds, or wise men. No, Mark is interested not in Jesus' first birth in Bethlehem, but in his second birth in the waters of the Jordan. Don't you think it was hard for Jesus-the-Carpenter to put down the hammer and saw at his age and take up a whole different career, a whole new way of life? Thirty was not young in that time and place. Don't you think he was at least a little bit scared of becoming the new thing that he felt himself called at last to be? A wandering preacher, a teacher, and healer, a homeless prophet! He was scared. Mark tells us later that Jesus' ecstatic experience in the waters of the Jordan shook him up so badly that he had to flee into the wilderness for forty days just to process the event. It was weird: the Spirit descending like a dove, screeching and clawing, the voice from heaven that apparently nobody heard but him, that secretive voice, promising him that he was loved. "You are my beloved child, and I'm pleased with you." It was bizarre. And that declaration of love is surely the scariest thing of all. It's frightening to be loved. Love always calls us to step away from all that's broken and stuck inside ourselves, to live into the fullness of our potential. Love beckons us out into the waters, and following love into the deep unknown, that's a scary thing to do!

Oh, you know what I mean. Love makes claims to us, makes us no longer our own. What keeps you from casting aside all ethical standards and living simply for yourself? Why can't you just take what you can get from life and leave others to fend for themselves, stab your coworkers in the back in order to get ahead? Why can't you lie, and cheat, and steal your way to the top? Or live for personal gain at the expense of everyone in your path? Sure, maybe a belief in things like karma and hellfire might help

to keep you more or less ethical, but a great many unbelieving people also manage to lead honest and virtuous lives. No, it's not a fear of damnation that makes you behave. The real reason you can't live a mean-spirited life and selfish life is because somewhere back there, somebody loved you. And once you've been loved, truly loved, you spend the rest of your life struggling with the claims that love makes upon you, the expectations, the assumptions. If you've got a more or less good heart, it's because someone looked at you with glistening eyes, brimming full of pride, and joy, and delight in who you are. The real reason you can't live ruthlessly is because someone back in your history loved you, chose you, invested in you. Being loved takes away your freedom to be selfish. If we're loved, then the one who loves us has some ownership in us. Being loved gives us responsibilities. Being loved means that we are possessed, not only by the one who loves us but also by the world in which love is, a world which needs us to reinvest ourselves lovingly back into its life. Jesus cannot go back to the life he lived before, however innocent, because he has had an epiphany in the waters of the Jordan, a new vision, telling him that God is love, and that he himself is the object of that love. He's no longer free to live as if he doesn't matter now that he's been reminded so powerfully that he does. Jesus the Galilean can no longer go back to building chairs now that he knows love's call to transformation. Have you ever seen the bumper sticker that says, "Try to be the person your dog thinks you are"? Isn't that how transformation works? At what point did love reveal itself to you and cause you to rethink all your selfish designs? Yes, Jesus became the Christ in the waters of the Jordan, his transformation was begun, when he realized that he was loved.

Oh, and I bet there was boredom, too. The well-known author, Elizabeth Gilbert, who wrote the book *Eat, Pray, Love*, says, "I've never seen any life transformation that didn't begin with the person in question finally getting tired of their own B.S." (Except that she did not use the initials.) You wake up one day, on a morning that seems much like the others, and you glance around to realize that your living looks almost nothing like what you'd wanted for yourself, your lofty ideals, your faded old dreams. You're bored. And yet, you got to where you are in life all by your own choosing. Day by day, hour by hour, you've arrived at this life through a long series of choices, each one of which—at the moment you made it—temporarily outweighed all the better things that you wanted your life to be. It's at times like these that you can almost hear the voice of those who loved you long ago, whispering the painful question, "Why don't you move forward? Why don't you do the thing, be the thing, that you always knew you ought to be? Why don't you let go of that bad habit, that abusive relationship, that self-fulfilling attitude and live like one who is loved, one who is free in turn to love?"

The British writer, Francis Spufford, has written a new book of Christian apologetics—that's to say, a defense of Christian doctrine. Interestingly, he doesn't use Scripture or logic to make his case. Instead he uses emotion. He believes that faith makes sense from an emotional point of view, that faith is one of many solutions to a deep emotional need in human beings. Spufford tells the story of a night in 1997 when he and his wife stayed up from midnight until 6am arguing. He implies that he had been unfaithful to her, though he never comes out and says it. But the troubled couple spend the whole night going over the same old hurts and blames over and over, until at last his wife had to go to work, and he—as a writer—had to go to a coffee shop, presumably to

write. But once he arrived at his favorite cafe, he was taken aback when the guy behind the counter put Mozart's Clarinet Concerto on the sound system, the Adagio.

If I hadn't written this sermon on a Saturday, I'd have given the first few bars to Anne to play for you, because it's familiar music that you'd recognize. The novelist, Richard Powers, says that it sounds like mercy. And Spufford writes, "It is not music that denies anything. It offers a strong, absolutely calm rejoicing, but it does not pretend there is no sorrow. On the contrary, it sounds as if it comes from a world where sorrow is perfectly ordinary, but still there is more to be said. I had heard it lots of times," he says, "but this time it felt to me like news. It said: everything you fear is true. And yet. And yet. Everything you have done wrong, you have really done wrong. And yet. And yet. The world is wider than you fear it is, wider than the repeating rigmaroles in your mind, and it has *this* in it, as truly as it contains your unhappiness. Shut up and listen, and let yourself count, just a little bit, on a calm that you do not have to be able to make for yourself, because here it is, freely offered. You are still deceiving yourself, said the music, if you don't allow for the possibility of *this*. There is more going on here than what you deserve, or don't deserve. There is *this*, as well. And it played the tune again, with all the cares in the world."

And that soul-restoring music, under those raw circumstances, created a moment of transformation, a numinous, watery moment of Jordan-like proportions, when one troubled spirit was claimed by love and enabled to move forward into the new thing, the better thing, that he was called to become. Ah, transformation! My dear Camp-Meeting-Methodist grandmother believed that it could only happen in one way: a tearful, penitent march down the aisle to the altar, there to turn from sin and claim Jesus as Lord of your life, as the congregation sings "Just As I Am." I must admit; that road to transformation has worked beautifully for a lot of people in this world. But there are other ways, too. Love will call out over the waters; it will call out through music, and through words; love will lay claim to us in moments of silence, in solitude, in community. Love will call us again and again, though we'll only occasionally have ears to hear it. It will lay claim to us and reveal to us the truth that we can no longer go on living as we are. This is the kind of awakening that happened to Jesus at the Jordan, and the repercussions of that moment in time are still being felt all around the world.

Oh, the many lives you could have lived! But only one of them matters: the one that you'll live now under the claims of love, the life that is not entirely your own. How might our world look today if Jesus had never dipped his toe in the chilly waters of the Jordan? What if the water made him shudder, and turn, and go back home to the life he'd known before? What if he'd never come to the all-transforming realization that he was loved, and that his job in this world was to live like it? And you? If you don't change directions, you just might end up where you're going. But it's a new day in a new year. Into every life there comes a quiet moment when we look around and realize, perhaps with some disappointment or resignation, "So this is what I've given myself to, this is what I am to live as and die as; this will be what I'm known for." How differently might you live if you remembered that you are loved? You, surrounded by the sawdust and the hammers of your old life, can you hear the voice calling out to you above the waters of change? "You are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased." Now, go and live like it! Go and live like it! Amen.