



# Sunday's Sermon

Pastor Lara Forbes



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Growing Together in Christ to Love and Serve All People

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## Baptism of Our Lord

January 10, 2021

Mark 1:1-11

Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Some friends of mine attend a church in Burlington, up in Skagit County. And the practice of their congregation is to baptize people after they've reached a certain age and have decided for themselves. And the baptisms are done in the Skagit River.

So when my friends' son, CJ, was about 10 years old he decided that he wanted to be baptized and it was scheduled for late September that year. You all know that in this part of the country, river water is already cold at that time of year. And the weather forecast for that *day* was cold and rainy. The pastor wore hip waders, and poor CJ was in shorts and a t-shirt.

My sister was able to attend, and she'd told me where and when it was all going to happen. And while we were talking about it she asked, "What kind of gift do I buy him for his baptism?" And I said, "Hand warmers! The kid's gonna freeze!" And she did include those as part of his gift, and he used them that day.

When we read the description of Jesus' baptism in Mark's gospel, it's minimal. John was doing a Jewish purification rite for repentant sinners that was performed in "living water" - in this case, a running river.

But in this account, there's no conversation between Jesus and John. And there aren't a lot of details about the other people who were baptized that day. What we know is that Jesus was baptized in a river in the wilderness.

Any of us who has spent any amount of time near a river knows that it's a powerful body of water. And even when it looks peaceful and safe on the surface, it's still forceful and even sometimes dangerous underneath.

So being near one, let alone standing in one, requires a certain amount of awareness. Even though CJ was with arm's reach of his dad or his pastor during his baptism, he had to pay attention to his surroundings. Because in a river, if you aren't careful, it'll sweep you off your feet and potentially carry you away.

But Jesus didn't only stand in a river that day, he also saw the heavens torn apart. Not just opened, but *torn apart*. The act of opening something, like a book, is usually gentle.

But tearing something apart requires a force that can be thought of as dangerous. Because once something has been torn apart it can never be put back the way it was.

All of this gives us an idea of the power that was present not only at Jesus' baptism, but also the power that drove him into the wilderness immediately afterward and stayed with him and helped him to survive the temptations there. And it stayed with him throughout his life and ministry, even as he entered into places of suffering, chaos, and despair.

When we do a baptism in a church setting, it's usually calm and orderly. And it can lead us to think that that same power *isn't* present in our own baptisms. Or that when we're baptized, or that *because* we're baptized, our lives magically become easier and less complicated. And that couldn't be further from the truth.

<sup>1</sup>Author Annie Dillard has said that when we're baptized, we all should wear crash helmets and life preservers. And that our baptismal certificates should say: "This is a passport to places you never thought you would go, to be an emissary of the living God in the desert and the wilderness, to plant seeds of hope and healing and life."

When you think about it like that, baptism sounds like a dangerous thing. And if we take seriously the promises that we make or that are made on our behalf, it is kinda dangerous. And that isn't necessarily a bad thing.

Christian baptism, water together with God's word, is an outward sign of an action that *God* has already taken in a person's heart. God is the actor in all of this, not any of us. And our baptism is a visible reminder of God's gifts of mercy, grace, forgiveness, and promise of life in Christ. We live our lives in response to those gifts.

And as we learn what means, that life of response, we come to understand that our lives *don't* stop or get easier after we're baptized. If anything, the pace picks up because there's so much work to be done in God's name. So many seeds of hope and healing that need to be planted.

The events of last Wednesday at the U.S. Capitol revealed a lot about who we are as a country. Partisan politics aside, those events affirmed that we're broken and deeply, deeply divided. As people of God, we have our work cut out for us - and I don't mean to say that we have all the answers, because we don't.

But I *do* mean to say that part of our life of response - the life we live because of our baptism - means wading into difficult waters: pointing out the truth about how last Wednesday was handled in contrast to the demonstrations this past summer; asking the hard questions about why that is, listening to the difficult answers, and repenting as a nation, so that we can do the work to heal and repair and live in a way that honors life.

The life we live because of our baptism isn't easy; we were never promised that it would be. But when we're given the passport to the places we never thought we'd go, we aren't sent out into the wilderness alone to fend for ourselves.

The power that tore open the heavens at Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit, was present at each of *our* baptisms. It's the same Spirit that moved over the waters at creation and through people throughout history. And she continues to move through us every day with a power all her own.

And because she does, she changes us in such a way that we can't ever go back to the way we were before. We *do* end up doing things we never could have imagined, and that will have us on our knees asking God, "You sure about this??"

We may end up in situations where we'll need hand warmers or hip waders, or crash helmets or life vests. And we will certainly end up in places where we need a tender heart, and a willingness to listen and to learn and to repent and to pray.

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1 <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2014-12/sunday-january-11-2015>

It *does* sound dangerous. But the fact that we're never in it alone is what makes it doable.

When the heavens were torn open at Jesus' baptism, it was a visible sign that God's relationship to people had changed and that it would never be put back to the way it was before. And when Jesus was sent out from there, he showed us that not even *he* got through life by himself, because no one makes it through this life alone.

That same power that went with Jesus, the Holy Spirit, also goes with us. She enters into the chaos with us and helps us to navigate it.

Jesus doesn't ask us to go anywhere he hasn't already been. Any place that is chaotic or confusing or broken - he knows what it's like to be there and how overwhelming it can be. Baptized life in Christ sounds dangerous, and there are times when it will completely unnerve us, but it's doable because he's in it with us. Thanks be to God! Amen.