

## Adventurous Waters

*Northminster Presbyterian Church: Baptism of Our Lord, Year B (2012)*

*The lessons: Acts 19<sup>1-7</sup>; Mark 1<sup>4-11</sup>*

It is easy to think of the Four Gospels as being more or less the same. They tell basically the same story about basically the same person—Christ Jesus. But in reality, the Gospels are incredibly different. Matthew—if it were a movie, a film—would be a National Geographic documentary: “And our archaeologists have discovered the forty two generation genealogy of the man known as Jesus.” Luke would be a drama with deep characters and a strong plot, something like George Clooney’s *The Descendants* or Terence Malick’s *The Tree of Life*. John would be one of those independent foreign films—one of those high brow philosophical pieces—where supporting actors stroke their chins and New York film critics rave about the brilliance of the work while the rest of us watch in the viewing room at the Grandin and wonder what the heck the characters are talking about. But Mark. Mark would be an action-adventure film, *Mission Impossible* or *G.I. Joe*. Something is always happening in Mark. Mark uses the word “immediately” forty one times in its scant few chapters. As soon as one episode of action occurs, something else immediately falls on its heels. There is no time to stop and take a breath.

If you’ve seen any of the James Bond movies, you know how the very first scene is an action scene, and Mark is the same. Mark has no time for genealogies or shepherds following a romantic star. When Mark opens, he launches into action—a baptism. It is no ordinary baptism. In keeping with Christ’s edict of the first being last and the last being first, a man without sin undergoes a baptism of repentance, a Messiah humbles himself to the ministry of a sinful human, and the One conceived by the Spirit has the Spirit descend upon him.

Once again our English translation fails us, as it doesn’t capture the New Year’s Day fireworks of language. The heavens do not open up and they are not merely torn—they are ripped, shredded, rent open. This is a scene parallel to Christ’s crucifixion, when the veil in the Temple was torn in two and our relationship to God was no longer obstructed. Christ in his resurrection, Christ in his baptism, tears down the Berlin Wall between us and God, such that what separates us from God is no more. We are his. Nothing is in the way.

And a voice comes booming down, a thunderous voice that would make James Earl Jones sound like Alvin and the Chipmunks. It brings those precious, needed, life-giving words: “You are my Son. . .with you I am well pleased”. The apostle Paul will later write that Jesus is the first fruits of the rest of us. He is specifically talking about resurrection: Christ’s permanent resurrection is the foreshadowing, the first chapter of our permanent resurrections. Or, in the words of the hallowed sixties song: When I die and they lay me to rest, I’m going to go to the place that’s the best. It’s true here, too. Christ’s baptism is the opening chapter of our baptisms. His being claimed by the Father is the beginning of our being claimed by the Father.

We don’t much think of our baptisms as adventures, as *Die Hard* movies, and indeed many of us don’t even remember our baptisms. But make no mistake, Christians: At this font begins the adventure of a lifetime, the adventure of an eternity. This font is where God says: *You’re mine. You belong to me. You are my child and with you I am well pleased.* We forget that sometimes. We get into the tradition, the ritual, and we forget what our baptism means, how God claims us, how God takes over our lives. Christians, baptism is anything but ritual or a tradition. It is the rending of the heavens, the booming of a voice, the claim of a Father over a child, the setting of a believer against the powers of this world.

*Master & Commander* is a movie about Captain Jack Aubrey, played splendidly by Russell Crowe. Captain Aubrey commands the HMS Surprise, and he is charged with chasing a French frigate along the Brazilian coast. Water is significant character in the movie, an extended metaphor; when Captain Aubrey makes the right call he usually finds the waters carry him quickly, and when he makes a bad call, the tumultuous waters beat and batter his ship and men. But the water always gets him where he is supposed to be. He always reached his destination. That is what these baptismal waters offer you, Christian: Sometimes the way is calm, sometimes stormy, sometimes you meet fierce opposition, but the waters will unswervingly carry you to your destination.

My hope for you is that in this, the year of our Lord two thousand twelve, you take your baptism more seriously than you've ever taken it before. I hope each and every day of this year you relish in being a child of God, that you follow Christ through those baptismal waters and into changing this world, that you never forget, however turbulent life may be, that these baptismal waters will carry you into God's safe harbor, at long last. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.