

Jesus' Baptism and Our Conversion

Mark 1:9-20 by Patty Friesen

Today's scripture begins, "In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee," which was tantamount to introducing him as being from Nowheresville, Palestine. Galilee was on the northern border of Palestine and regarded with suspicious and contempt by most southern Jews. Galilee was surrounded by Greek cities, populated heavily by gentiles, predominantly poor and geopolitically cut off from Jerusalem. Yet it is precisely in this figure of obscure origins in a remote location that divine favour falls.

The four gospels do not always agree on details of Jesus' life but on his baptism they all four agree that as he was coming up out of the water, heaven was torn open and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove and voice came from heaven saying, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." This inauguration of Jesus as God's Son seems to be the most important detail the gospel writers want to give us about Jesus's authority and relationship to God and with these powerful words of love from a father to a son, we have a new image of God himself as proud, vulnerable parent.

From his baptism, Mark says, at once, or immediately, the Spirit sent Jesus out into the desert for forty days, harking back to the Israelites

wandering in the desert for forty years. As for the Israelites, God provided for Jesus in the wilderness. In the midst of these trials, he was with the wild animals and the angels attended him. This makes us think of Adam naming the wild animals in the Garden of Eden or the image of the peaceable kingdom, the lamb lying down with the lion, the redemption and harmony of Christ and creation.

From the wilderness, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. Walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew fishing and told them to come and follow me. I will make you fishers of men and at once or immediately, they left their nets and followed him. When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Immediately, without delay he called them and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him. It is interesting that while James and John left their father in the boat, they didn't leave their mother. She followed along as well, mentioned as one of the key women who go to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body with spices. From fishing to making history, we never know where the call of Jesus will lead us.

This week the United States remembers a follower of Jesus, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. A native of the South, Dr. King got his education in

Boston and was safely settled there in the North with his wife Coretta and children. Then in 1954 he got the call to pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Dr. King said, “At this time I was torn in two. Should I accept a church in the South, with all the tragic implications of segregation or an available pulpit in the North. Coretta and I discussed the all-important question of raising children in the bonds of segregation and all we had been deprived of growing up in the South. For several days we prayed over these matters and finally we agreed that in spite of the disadvantages and inevitable sacrifices, our greatest service could be rendered in our native South.”

Fifteen months after King began his ministry, the civil rights struggle in Montgomery escalated. Rosa Parks, a black seamstress had been arrested after refusing to yield her seat on a bus to a white man. The incident immediately sparked a bus boycott by the city’s black population. King had been drafted to lead the boycott committee. As he faced the crowd in the Baptist church that evening he began, “As you know my friends, there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. If we are wrong, then Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer and never made a difference on earth. If we are wrong, then justice

is a lie.” This sermon galvanized the bus boycott as Montgomery, Alabama struggled with non-violent protests for justice and equality for blacks.

King’s house was bombed. He was repeatedly jailed. On one occasion he was nearly fatally stabbed. His persecutions mirrored Apostle Paul’s. All the while he continued to grow in his commitment to nonviolence, not simply as a political tactic, but as a thoroughgoing principle of life. In April 1968, King was leading another non-violent public protest with city sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee. That evening he preached, “We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t matter with me now because I’ve been to the mountaintop. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And he’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know as a people, we will get to the Promised Land.”

King did not represent himself as a saint. Posthumous revelations of some of his weaknesses underscored the fact that King, at the time of his death, was still evolving, still on the way to reconciling the logic of his faith with his personal conduct with women. King struggled to be more than his

weakest qualities. He challenged the church and all Americans to do the same.

Over 50 years later, the civil rights struggle still goes on. Next Sunday Patrick and I will be in church in St. Louis, Missouri visiting friends and remembering the courageous discipleship of Dr. King in the heart of current racial tensions in Missouri after the shooting of unarmed black teenager Michael Brown by a white police officer. This spring, Rosthern Junior College will be serving in Alabama and hearing about how racism still impacts those communities they are serving. Students and sponsors alike are transformed by their time spent in black communities and they cannot help but make connections to the racism experienced by aboriginal and immigrant communities back here in Saskatchewan.

In the words of Canadian writer, John Ralston Saul, “We are all living in historical moments that are uncomfortable, either shaping them or being swept along by them. Idle No More swept into our lives in the winter of 2012. The founders of Idle No More, Nina Wilson, Sylvia McAdam, Jessica Gordon and Sheela McLean, young aboriginal women from Saskatchewan were concerned about parliamentary bills C-38 and C-45 weakening water ways and weakening the Fisheries Act, essentially an assault on the environment. Indigenous people massed in protest where protest was not

expected, in shopping malls, at intersections as well as on Parliament Hill. Federal political leaders attended with solicitude at the side of Chief Theresa Spence who was on a hunger strike on Victoria Island in the Ottawa River within sight of Parliament. The whole country seemed to be hypnotized by the seemingly abrupt arrival of indigenous people at the very centre of national consciousness. This is the great issue of our time, the great unsolved Canadian question upon which history will judge us all.”

At Pastors’ Day at Rosthern Junior College, we heard about a parent who is using her residential school survivor money to send her teenager to a residential school at RJC. There’s much power and healing in that act. May God be present to us this Epiphany season of light, lighting our way, calling us into baptism and discipleship and into the shaping force of history.

Let us pray...