

West Branch Community of Christ

Participant Companion Guide – Lectionary Lessons Pilot

January 11, 2014

First Sunday after the Epiphany (Ordinary Time)

Theme: OF WATER AND SPIRIT

Mark 1:4–11

4John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 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 just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Central Ideas:

- *Jesus is established as the Son of God during the experience related in today's scripture.*
- *Jesus demonstrated his connection and solidarity with humankind and modeled the importance of baptism for all who would follow him.*
- *Baptism of water and spirit represents a covenant between an individual, God, and the church community, and marks the beginning of that individual's discipleship rather than being an end in itself.*

Exploring the Scripture

Before diving into today's scripture, it may be helpful to briefly consider the book in which it is contained. Mark is regarded as the earliest of the four Gospels, probably written sometime around 60 CE. The author focuses throughout the book on three primary themes: (1) Jesus' suffering servanthood, (2) the person and authority of Jesus, and (3) the total commitment involved in discipleship. The primary concern, however, appears to be establishing who Jesus was.

Although the story of John the Baptist begins the book of Mark, the author doesn't say much about him. Rather, the focus is more on the fact that John's ministry and his baptism of Jesus were preparatory for Jesus' continuing ministry. Mark, as does the book of Luke, uses the experience of Jesus' baptism to make a Christological statement.

John is quoted as identifying Jesus as "one who is more powerful than I" (v. 7). The description of the Holy Spirit "descending like a dove" on Jesus and a voice from heaven saying, "You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased" establishes Jesus as the Son of God (vv. 10–11).

However, the reader is left to ponder the question, "If Jesus was the Son of God and therefore apparently without sin, why did he need to be baptized for the remission of sins?" Water baptism was practiced in that time for that specific purpose. Some scholars suggest that requesting baptism showed Jesus' desire to be united with humans through this ritual act and, thereby, solidify the human part of his nature. Looking to the book of Matthew, one finds more indication Jesus wanted to show his identity and solidarity with humanity as he is quoted as saying he needed to be baptized, "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). He seems to have been saying, "I am one of you and, therefore, I need to experience what you experience." Finally, it suggests something of Jesus' profound humility; a characteristic of Jesus worth our emulation as his disciples.

Regardless of any lingering questions, today's scripture makes clear the value, importance, and connectedness of both water baptism and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Followers of Jesus use temporal means (water) to demonstrate their willingness to surrender completely to and connect with the Divine and the supporting community. God uses spiritual means (Holy Spirit) to connect with individuals and the assembled community, thus completing a covenant.

This experience prepared Jesus to face the temptation in the wilderness that followed immediately. It also marked the beginning of his earthly ministry. This chronological order is not lost on the careful reader—baptism of water and of spirit is a beginning, not an end in itself. Just as Jesus was prepared for his earthly ministry, so too are we prepared by the interconnected sacraments of baptism and confirmation to fully engage as disciples in the mission of Jesus Christ which is "what matters most for the journey ahead" (Doctrine and Covenants 164:9f).