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Epiphany – 2nd Sunday

“The ‘On the Run’ Baptism”

Genesis 1:1 - 5

Mark 1:4 - 11

Text: “I have baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”
. . . Mark 1:8

For those in this church that have been to Nicaragua, they are familiar with “On the Run” Esso stations (that’s right, in Nicaragua it’s Esso, not Exxon). The local “On the Run” station is where we stop to get out purified water, where everyone runs in and buys snacks for the journey, or at least uses their restrooms. “On the Run” was a good name for those Service Stations – for indeed; we were always “on the run” to go somewhere else.

Likewise you will find something very distinctive in Mark’s Gospel – an incredible sense of urgency about conveying the ministry of Jesus. The author of Mark uses the Greek word “euthys”, which means immediately, 42 times – 9 times in the first chapter alone. Mark begins with barely an introduction, and by verse four we encounter the story of Jesus being baptized by John the baptizer. “And **immediately** as Jesus was coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on Him.” And it seems that no sooner is Jesus out of the water than, “And the Spirit **immediately** drove Him out into the wilderness” where He was tempted 40 days by Satan. No sooner does Jesus do something than “immediately” Jesus hits the road to elsewhere. In that first chapter of Mark, Jesus calls some of His disciples, teaches with authority, heals a man with an unclean spirit, heals many at Simon Peter’s mother, and several others who were sick or possessed with demons, preached in the neighboring towns, and cleanses a leper. Indeed, some of Jesus’ best teachings were spoken “on the run.”

It creates a sense of urgency about being claimed by God’s Spirit – the one that came down on Jesus and said “You are My Son, the Beloved; with You I am well pleased.”

There is even urgency occurring in Jesus’ Baptism – “**immediately** as Jesus was coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on Him.”

I want today to interrupt this immediacy for a second to consider another issue that we face – maybe not today, but I bet we will encounter this issue a few times in the coming year. And this is the issue of the two kinds of baptism. You know, many people feel that while they were baptized as an infant, but since they didn’t know anything when it happened; they now, as an affirmation of their new faith, want to be

baptized again. It becomes an issue of infant baptism vs. adult baptism; or as some say, water baptism vs. spirit baptism.

So let's look a little more closely at this passage and see how it can help us understand our baptism.

First there is the baptism by John the Baptist, because it is often confused with Christian Baptism. John is portrayed in the manner of the Old Testament prophets. Isaiah 40 says it and then Mark's Gospel quotes that "there will be a voice crying in the wilderness preparing the way of the Lord." In our Christian interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, John the Baptist is this *preparer of the way*. The baptism John offers is a message of repentance. John preaches a "baptism of repentance" for "the forgiveness of sins."

One of the central issues regarding a discussion of Baptism or baptisms is who is the principal actor? With John's Baptism it is those who repent and the one who baptizes – in this case, John the Baptist. The person who is baptized acknowledges a need to change their life, to "repent." And the baptism by John becomes a washing; it is a ritual of cleansing – preparedness for the One Who is coming. It is to get people ready for what is to come. It's for getting cleaned up, preparing for the real thing which is to come.

On the other hand, John himself says that Jesus' baptism will be a baptism of God's presence. When Jesus is baptized the principal actor is no longer the one coming to be baptized, nor is it the person being baptized. Now God will be the active agent and principal actor.

Notice that when Jesus is baptized by John, something very significant happens in the midst of Jesus' baptism. Hear again the words: "**immediately** as Jesus was coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on Him." The action shifts suddenly from the act of a person washing another to the act of God. The heavens open, the Spirit descends upon Jesus like a dove. A voice speaks, "You are My Son, the beloved, with You I am well pleased."

Jesus is the sign of the presence of God. God's Spirit rests upon Him. The Spirit testifies to the entire world Who Jesus is. His baptism becomes the occasion for that testimony of the Spirit. The baptism of Jesus is not restricted to a ritual of human preparedness, human repentance, and human cleansing; because there is now nothing for which to get ready. For with the coming of Jesus, the Kingdom is here, it is, as Jesus later says, in the "midst of you." Jesus' baptism is **not** by John – the one preparing the way – but instead Jesus is baptized by the Holy Spirit.

And this is the baptism we have all received.

In this sense, baptism is God's work, not ours. Salvation is God's gift, not our achievement. Grace is a gift. So is faith. In baptism, God adopts us as God's own. God reaches for us, grabs for us, and claims us as God's chosen ones, as heirs, as royalty. Baptism occurs, not because we have come to God, but because God has first come to us.

So, we respond to God's urging, God's call and we come and we are baptized. But this baptism is not the end. It is the beginning of a lifelong pilgrimage with God, a

lifelong journey with our Creator. Baptism is no mere momentary event. It is a lifelong process of conversion and nurture.

Baptism is a once-and-for-all event which usually begins when we are babies, but takes our whole lives to finish.

Every day we must live our baptism. Every day we must respond to God's gracious gifts in our lives. Whether we are baptized at age six weeks or age sixty years, then after our baptism we must renew our baptismal vows. We open ourselves again to God's work in our lives, saying "Yes!" to all the big and little things we do and people we meet, and the promises we keep throughout the day.

It reminds me of the "squish".

There was a man who, while walking through a city park on a hot, sultry day came upon a stream, beautiful and marvelous, glistening and inviting. Unable to resist, and in a fit of "second childhood", the man waded into the refreshing coolness of the stream.

But a funny thing happened, his shoes never dried out and they began to "squish!" He first noticed the squish when he kneeled. Later he heard the "squish" when he danced and celebrated. Once when he fell down, he clearly heard the "squish" as he got up again. He heard the "squish" whenever he stepped forward to help someone. And he began to hear his wet shoes "squish" as he walked along his ordinary journey through the ordinary world.

The "squish" is kind of like our baptism. It's like walking in wet shoes in a dry, ordinary world, reminding us of that day that God claimed us.

God keeps His promise at baptism. The Spirit is busy in us every day. Some days the Spirit's work in me is especially vivid and meaningful, some days it's not. Some days I respond in faith to the Spirit's leading, some days I do not respond. But my response or lack of it does not deny God's presence in my life. And God's presence has been there since my baptism.

I think of it this way: when I was born, I was given all of my natural endowments. I possessed within my body all the genetic characteristics which I would have for the rest of my life. Likewise, at my baptism, I have been given all the spiritual endowments which I will ever have. They are mine, not as possessions or achievements, *but*, like my natural endowments, as *gifts from God*. I have developed, enjoyed, used, and shared some of those gifts. Many have not been discovered by me yet. I await the time when the circumstances of life or the prompting of the Spirit or the needs of others call forth the Spirit's gifts within me. When they are called forth, that will be part of a continual living out of my baptism, a continuing completing of what God began in me at my birth.

As John Steinbeck said, "A journey is a person in itself; no two are alike, and all plans, safeguards, policing and coercion are fruitless. We find after years of struggle that "we do not take a trip; a trip takes us." If you will, we are "on the run," guided by God's spirit. There is no preset blueprint for how an individual or a community will play out that trip – at least not one that we can easily decipher. One gift is not better than some other person's gift. You and I have gifts which have been given to us from our birth that we have not stumbled on yet, much less used to their full potential. We have missions to accomplish which we have not yet dared to venture. We do not know where the Spirit will lead us next. Or, what gifts we have been given. Or, where God

may call us to use them. But we do know because of the promise that God has given us, that by working and praying together in God's Spirit, we can discern a future of Christian service for this church.

William Willimon once said, "In your baptism God meets you, embraces you, comes to you, and commissions you to be about God's work." It is our Baptism to be "on the run."

Baptism tells me what my dull spirit forever wants to forget: I am claimed and chosen by God – just as all of you are. We don't create our church's ministry out of what we **want** to do, but out of a sense that **God has called us to do it**. God's claim on us supersedes our own selfish wants. It is the squish as I walk and work among God's people. It is the claim on me that I am gifted; that the Spirit of God is upon me, . . . and you, . . . and you, . . . and you, . . . And together we have been baptized to do the discipleship work of Jesus – to bring about Good News to the poor, release to the captives, and to set at liberty those who are oppressed.