

## BAPTISM

*(Mark 1:9-13)*

In Mark, Jesus' story begins with his baptism. The narrative relates Jesus' inauguration and ordination for his mission in a highly intimate manner. Rather than observing this event from the perspective of a detached observer, the teller of this tale recounts the event from Jesus' point of view, as he sees the dove and hears the voice. As a result, Jesus is introduced as a highly sympathetic person with whom we can identify. He may be a prophet, even the Son of God, but he is one who is already known from the inside out. The storyteller asks us, as listeners, to join Jesus at the beginning of his journey. If we do, his journey becomes our journey. In some sense, we are baptized with Jesus.

### Learning the Story

Mark's story was sounds. When persons wrote in the ancient world, they were composing sounds. They assumed that persons who read their writings would read aloud. In turn, the normal practice in the ancient world, particularly with religious traditions, was to memorize that which was read.

One of the reasons stories were memorized had to do with the way ancient scribes wrote. They used no punctuation marks, capitals, or spaces between words. When a scribe reached the end of a line, even if it was in the middle of a word, he moved down to the next line. This is an approximation of how the first episode of Mark's story would have been written. I suggest that you read it out loud and notice the fluidity of your reading:

andithappenedinthosedaysjesuscamefromnazarethingalileeandwasbaptizedinthe  
jordanbyjohnandimmediatelyashewascomingupoutofthewaterhesawtheheavenstor  
nopenandthespiritasadovecomingdownuponhimandavoicewentoutoftheheavensyouare  
mybelovedsonwithyouiamwellpleased

In fact, this manuscript is much easier to read than the ancient manuscripts because the letters are all uniform. You can see why, in order to read the story aloud, it was necessary to memorize it. These texts were not meant for silent reading. Just looking at this one episode gives me a headache!

Because of our reading conventions, we have a primary problem in dealing with biblical narratives. We often assume that the Gospel of Mark, for example, is a text, a series of black marks on pieces of white paper bound together in the middle. But that assumption is false. Those marks on the page are not what Mark composed. Mark's account was never intended to be a soundless text, perceived only with the eyes. Mark's purpose in writing down a story such as Jesus' baptism was to record the sounds in the only available medium.

In fact, during the period in which Mark was written, students in Jewish schools were forbidden to read the sacred literature of Israel in silence. Therefore, if we want to experience Mark's story appropriately, we need to read it aloud and memorize the sounds.

In adapting the Revised Standard Version rendition of this story, I went back to the Greek text and sought to render into English as many of the repeated and assonant sounds as possible. One reason for doing this is to make it easier to internalize and remember the stories. But it is also because these stories were composed as sounds. Words are repeated and

modified with exquisite richness and care. The fullest possible rendering of the sounds of the Greek story in an English translation may help people to hear the story more fully and to learn it more easily.

I would suggest that you find some way of visually connecting the verbal threads in your text with circles and lines, with colors, or with some kind of chart. Then listen for the sound patterns in the story.

### *The Story*

And it happened in those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John.

And immediately as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn open and the Spirit, as a dove, coming down upon him.

And a voice came out of the heavens, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

And immediately the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness.

And he was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan.

And he was with the wild beasts, and the angels served him.

### *Interiorization*

The first step is to get the sounds of Mark's story inside ourselves. I like Walter Ong's name for this process in oral cultures: interiorization. When a story has been learned deeply, it is no longer outside, as an object to be examined. The sounds get inside and resonate, creating vibrations in the interior spaces of the body.

I have found it helpful for story learning to think of myself as having three interior centers: the head, the heart, and the gut or lower belly. Each center has its own kind of associations.

The head stores the words, concepts, and structures of the story. We think the story in our brain space. The heart is the locus of the emotions of the story. The emotional dynamics of a story make us laugh or cry. We feel the story in our hearts. The action of the story happens in the lower belly or bowels. The Greek verb for "to have compassion or pity" names this center best, and you need to say the word in order to sense its meaning: *splagnizomai*. It literally means "to turn over the bowels." In the Gospels, it describes Jesus' feeling of compassion or mercy for someone, such as the leper (Mark 1:41) or the crowd (Matt. 9:36; 14:14). In the bowels, we experience what the story does.

A way of internalizing the story is, therefore, to experience the story with each part of the self and to identify its movements or characteristics. The resonances can then be stored or associated with that moment in the story. Those associations are the stuff of remembering. Just as "to dis-member" means "to cut off parts of the body," "to re-member" means "to embody or flesh out again," to put the parts of the body back together again. To remember is to embody the story's resonance. There the associations can resonate in the interior spaces of the mind, the heart, and the bowels.

### *Learning the Story with a Partner*

These are some suggestions for working with a partner on learning a story. The basic process is to tell it back and forth. Sometimes it helps for one to read it aloud a phrase or sentence at a time and for the other to say it back. Then switch. After both of you have told it two or three times, take two or three minutes to tell it aloud to yourselves. And then tell it to each other. Let me review some elements of the story to notice as you are reciting.

1. Identify the structure of the story. As you are listening or studying, figure out the elements that tie the narrative together. Each chapter of this book begins with the text of a story arranged in episodes. These arrangements of stories are the end result of my critical analysis of the literary units of the gospel narrative. When I am learning a story, I also underline the verbal threads (repeated words) so that they will be easy to identify.

Some groups have found it helpful to make a recording of the story episode by episode and to listen to it. This is fun with a partner, especially if he or she likes to goof off a little. Persons who are visually oriented may make cartoons of stories, a kind of storytelling hieroglyphics. Ron Hill has his wife read him the story, and he says it back to her while drawing cartoons that symbolize the words. Others find it helpful to move with the story and get physically involved in it.

But whether in sound, image, or movement, identifying the structure of the story is an essential step. The more the individual words can be chunked together in blocks, the better.

2. Pay attention to the verbal connections between the episodes of the story. There is a saying about sermons that applies to stories: "Preaching a sermon is like flying an airplane. If you know how to take off and how to get back down on the ground, you can always figure out something in between." The two most important places in a story and in each episode are the beginning and the end. They are your connections. In the pause between the successive episodes, those connections are the life jackets that save the teller of the tale from the abyss of silence and the terror of forgetfulness. And if you pay attention to those life jackets, they are always there. The key is to relax, not panic, and trust that the connections will be there. If your partner is lost, don't jump in right away and save him or her. Relax and remember together.

3. Repeat the story in blocks but never in mindless regurgitation. Always "think" the story rather than merely repeating it. Storytelling is not mere repetition. It is a re-membering of the event. By rethinking the words with the structure and verbal connections in mind, the story will quickly be stored in long-term memory and will never be forgotten.

4. Tell it to your partner from beginning to end. If you forget, just keep going if you can and check out what you missed later. Don't ever stop and say, "I forgot." You didn't forget, you just lost a linkage. Go on with whatever you can remember. After you've gotten to the end, let your partner remind you of the place you forgot.

### *Tips for Learning the Story*

Most of the verbal threads in this story are tied to the story of John the Baptist, which precedes the baptism: baptized, Jordan, John, wilderness. Reading the two stories aloud together is the best way to identify those connections.

But there are also verbal threads within the episodes themselves. In the baptism episode there are "the heavens" first, torn open, then, a voice-and "out of" – at the beginning of the second and third sentences Jesus comes up "out of the water and a voice comes "out of" the heavens.

In the testing episode there is a frequent linkage between the last phrase of the first sentence and the first phrase of the next. First he was driven out "into the wilderness," then "he was in the wilderness."

There are also verbal threads tying the two episodes together. "Immediately" precedes both "as he was coming up out of the water" and "the Spirit drove him." This word (*euthus* in Greek) occurs frequently as a linkage throughout Mark and especially in the stories in the first section of the Gospel. The steady repetition of "immediately" gets the narrative off to a fast start. "The Spirit" descends "as a dove" in the first episode and "drove him out" in the second.

By creating these verbal links, the ancient storytellers built in the memory hooks that enabled first themselves and then others to remember and retell their stories.

### *Images*

Each episode begins with a description of the place where it took place: "in the Jordan" and "into the wilderness." By seeing the place in the mind's eye, you can see what happened there: the Jordan, the wilderness, and the wild beasts. Furthermore, the first episode is composed primarily of what Jesus saw and heard: the heavens torn open, the dove, and the voice.

### *Gestures*

It is said that if you tie the hands of storytellers, they can't remember the story. There is truth to this because storytellers remember stories with gestures. Ancient storytellers made vivid and broad gestures that also helped their listeners visualize the story.

In this story, there are many implicit gestures. Coming up out of the water invites a gesture of rising. "He saw the heavens torn open" is appropriately gestured with first a looking up and then a tearing motion. The descent of the dove, the Spirit driving him out, and the angels serving him are elements of the story that are naturally told with gestures as well as words.

### *Listening to the Story*

In Mark's story, the baptism of the crowds by John provides the context of Jesus' baptism. Baptism was an eschatological rite, a once and for all cleansing from sin. It was a sign of purification and repentance in preparation for the new age of the kingdom of God. It stood in contrast to the frequent baths for purification that were characteristic of Israelite religion. As his inauguration, Jesus is baptized in communal solidarity with all those who were being baptized by John. It is a primary sign of his identity with the people of Israel. He does not remain aloof, nor is he, like the kings of Israel, inaugurated by a special rite.

The storyteller immediately moves inside Jesus' mind and relates the rest of the episode from Jesus' point of view. The tearing open of the heavens, the descent of the dove, and the voice are described from Jesus' perspective. Thus, the narrator describes what Jesus saw and heard. The impact of this is to draw the story's listeners into a close relationship with Jesus as a person.

### *Notes on Individual Episodes*

**The baptism.** This is Jesus' ordination for his mission (vs. 9).

It is the structural equivalent of the anointings of the kings of Israel (I Sam. 9-10-the anointing of Saul; I Sam. 16-the anointing of David).

**The dove.** In the story of Noah (Gen. 8:8-12), the dove was the sign of life on the earth and of the end of the long period of darkness in the ark. In Mark's story (vs. 10), the dove is the sign of the Spirit and has all the associations of the end of the age of darkness.

**The voice from heaven.** Moses, Elijah, and many of the patriarchs and judges of Israel heard a voice from heaven that they knew to be the voice of God. An issue in telling Mark's story is how to speak God's words to Jesus (vs. 11). God's words are usually intoned in a deep, sonorous, and somewhat distant manner. The style is generally that of the unseen big voice in biblical movies and theatrical presentations. It is highly unlikely that this is the manner in which the evangelists told the story. In this saying a loving father first expresses deep affection for his son and then gives him a ringing personal affirmation. This is an intimate word that God says to Jesus himself. We as listeners are permitted to overhear this intimate word.

**Driven out into the wilderness.** This phrase (vs. 12) calls to mind Israel's forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Not only does this establish a connection between Jesus' experience and that of Israel, but also it makes clear the meaning of this time for Jesus. It was his time of testing. Jesus' tester is, however, different from Israel's. Satan is the symbol of the cosmic powers of evil, the forces of the old age. This episode sets the baptism and Jesus' ministry in the context of the apocalyptic battle between the powers of good and evil.

**The wild beasts.** Wild beasts were associated with the powers of evil in apocalyptic literature. Thus, the lions in the tale of Daniel in the lions' den (Dan. 6) are a narrative concretization of the beasts in Daniel's apocalyptic visions (Dan. 7-8) who symbolized the powers of evil and the empires of his age. In fact, the words of God to Daniel in these chapters (Dan. 9:22-23; 10:11, 18-19) are a narrative precedent for the more intimate words of God to Jesus.

**The angels.** Elijah was served food and water by an angel during his forty-day sojourn in the wilderness on his way to Horeb, the mountain of God (I Kings 19:5-8). The presence of the angels here (vs. 13) shows that Jesus, like Elijah, is being tested in a struggle between the powers of good and evil. This in turn makes clear how the story was told. It was not narrated as a simple statement of facts but in a grandiose and apocalyptic manner. Only the style of narration can adequately convey the cosmic character of this struggle.

In this context, it is now possible to identify some of the associations to be stored in the head, the heart, and the bowels of the storyteller. The thought of this story focuses on Jesus' identity: his relationship with John, Moses, and Elijah as the prophets of Israel; his relationship with God, the Father and the Spirit; and his role in relation to Satan and the wild beasts.

The emotions of the story are most intense in the fatherly words of the voice from the heavens to Jesus. Fear is associated with the wild beasts, while the presence of the angels is comforting. The action of the story is a commissioning, an inauguration of a great mission. The gut meaning of the story is then the empowerment and confirmation of Jesus as Messiah. It is the narrative equivalent of an ordination or inauguration. The story invites the listener to experience this event with Jesus, both as an observer and as an intimate co-participant. We, as listeners, are introduced to Jesus of Nazareth intimately and deeply at the beginning of his mission.

## Connections

The problem with telling these ancient narratives is that they can continue to be old stories with no relationship to the experience of storytellers and listeners now. Precisely because these are ancient stories, we often find it difficult to understand them sympathetically. For this reason, learning to tell the stories also requires that we explore the ways in which the stories connect with our experience.

There are several experiential connections between this story and our experience that can be explored. I will simply outline a few that you might want to try.

### *Getting to Know Someone Deeply in a Short Period of Time*

It takes very few words in this story to be introduced to Jesus at a deep level. And there are times when we meet or hear about someone and get to know them in a short period of time to a degree of depth that is amazing.

I remember vividly my first evening at Union Theological Seminary in New York. One of my new roommates was Russell Davis, an urbane graduate of the University of Virginia. That night, Russ and I sat up until the early morning telling each other the stories of our lives. We literally got inside each other's heads. And one set of stories we shared was our experiences of being called to ministry. By the end of that evening, we knew each other well. And we have been friends to this day.

The associations of moments like this provide an insight into one of the dynamics of this story. When I tell people about Russ, I tell a couple of his stories from that evening, and others both know him and the closeness of our ties of friendship. By remembering that evening, I know something of the atmosphere I want to generate in telling this story about Jesus of Nazareth.

### *Experiences of Commissioning, Inauguration, and Ordination*

This tradition also connects with experiences of commissioning. In everyone's life there are moments of being launched: graduations, installations, weddings, and baptisms. In those moments, particularly in retrospect, the direction of one's life comes into clear focus. These experiences can both illuminate and be illuminated by the story of Jesus' baptism.

One of the primary functions of these experiences is to empower persons to deal with the fear of the new things that are just ahead. A gift of this story is, therefore, that it can be a resource for persons who are undertaking a new mission or who are facing overwhelming fears. And those two often go together.

The story invites us to experience our own commissionings in the context of Jesus' baptism and testing in the wilderness. In relation to such a time or place in our lives, this story is a gift to be received. It is possible, for example, to pray this story, to enter into it imaginatively in direct relationship with God, the voice, Jesus, the dove. And, as Saint Ignatius of Loyola taught, one can compose that place and time now. To enter into that place and time is to meditate on the event. The story invites us to be there in all the immediacy of each of the senses. The sights, sounds, tastes, touches, and smells of this event in Jesus' life can emerge in prayer. That experience can in turn shed light on our relationship with Christ and on our mission.

### *Connecting with Present Needs*

Listening to the story in relation to one's present needs is another way of connecting with the story. This can happen most naturally with a spiritual companion who is exploring the stories with you. A simple process is to identify the need or situation that this story addresses in our experience and to share that with your friend. Then listen to the biblical story deeply. The role of a spiritual companion here is not to advise or direct but simply to share the story as it is received. If any light or direction emerges from the story, and it feels appropriate, it is good to share that with your friend. But there is no commitment or guarantee. The stories are not magical formulas whose incantation automatically generates light.

A human need addressed in this story is the sense of inadequacy, unworthiness, and fear that accompanies being commissioned for a great mission. If I were going to share that need with a spiritual companion at this moment, it would be in relation to writing this book. I feel inadequate for this task. And I am afraid. My fear is both that I will never accomplish the task and that if I do, it will not be worthy of its purpose. I know the tests that are involved in the process of writing, editing, and publishing a book. If you were with me in this moment, you might choose to tell me the story of Jesus' baptism. And if you are reading this now, you can also know that listening to this story in the centers of myself has set my inadequacies and fears in a new context. The beginning of this mission to which I have been called is now set in the context of Jesus' baptism and testing in the wilderness. I have another companion.

### Telling the Story

An essential step in the exploration of a biblical story is to tell it, first to yourself and perhaps to God, then to a partner, to a small group of friends or storytellers, to your primary faith community, and finally to anyone who wants to hear it. The interiorization of the story makes it possible to speak to the interiors of others. Once the story has percolated through the head, the heart, the lower belly, and even down to the toes, it can then come out of your mouth again and resonate fully in the telling. It is now a part of you and can become a story for someone else.

But the most critical element in sharing these stories is to protect the freedom of the listener. Biblical stories are not designed to persuade or to manipulate a listener into agreement. To be sure, there are appeals, and the stories are structured to invite response. But the freedom of the listener to respond in a variety of ways is built into the stories. They do not have only one meaning but open out onto a broad playground of meaning. There the listeners are invited to play.

The playground does have boundaries. It is possible to experience and interpret the stories in ways that are inappropriate to their intent. For example, it is inappropriate to hear this story as an account of Christian triumphalism over Judaism, in which Judaism is somehow superseded by Christianity. The ways in which Jesus' identity as Messiah and Son of God are a fulfillment of Israel's tradition are many and varied. But there is no one meaning or set of principles that can be drawn from this story. It is an invitation to enter into an event.

But every listener has the right to choose whether to hear the story and if so, how. The preservation of the openness of the biblical storytelling tradition is essential to its life. Therefore, with full affirmation of the freedom that God has given you and your listeners, I invite you to tell the story of Jesus' baptism to someone else.