

A MARKED PERSON

Scriptures: Mark 1:9-13; Romans 6:1-4

Last fall during a class on the plight of Palestinians in the Middle East, Shirley Carlton told us of meeting a Palestinian woman whom she assumed was a Muslim. But one day she heard the woman say something that made it sound like she was a Christian, and Shirley asked her, "Are you a Christian?" The woman then rolled up her sleeve to reveal a small cross tattooed on her lower forearm. She told Shirley that sometimes when Palestinian children are baptized, they have a cross tattooed on their arm as a sign of the faith to which they belong.

In America it would no big deal to have a cross tattooed on you arm. Many Americans, including many politicians, already wear their faith on their sleeve. But imagine what this would be like for a Palestinian child, living in area that is 97% Muslim, where in some countries it is illegal to convert from Islam to Christianity. And yet when they are baptized they tattoo their new identity permanently into their flesh. It is like when Jewish babies in the Old Testament were circumcised. Their new identity was literally cut into their flesh.

When Jesus was baptized, he did not receive a tattoo, but he still became a marked person. This is revealed in the way that Mark tells the story of Jesus' baptism. Turn now to the back of the bulletin and look at the story of Jesus' baptism from Mark, chapter 1. Let me start at verse 11. When Jesus was baptized a voice came from heaven saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved." That expression, "You are my Son," had a special meaning in the Old Testament. It is used in Psalm 2. Psalm 2 is an enthronement psalm. It was a song sung on the day that a new king was anointed and placed on the throne in Jerusalem. It's like playing "Hail to the Chief" at the inauguration of a president. It was a psalm that everyone in Israel associated the coronation of a new king. In verse 7 the new king speaks. He says, "I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you.'"

Do you see what it means when God says to Jesus at his baptism, "You are my Son"? It means that God is declaring Jesus to be the new king, the promised Messiah. The word Messiah means "Anointed One," because kings in Israel were not crowned but anointed. In his baptism Jesus is in a sense anointed as the promised king. Jesus is marked as the person through whom the kingdom of God will come to this world.

But at the same time Jesus becomes marked in another sense. Look at Genesis 22:1-2.

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, the beloved, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you."

In the Greek Old Testament the word "beloved" that is used of Isaac is exactly the same word that God uses of Jesus at his baptism. In other words Jesus is the beloved Son of God in two senses. He is the Son who will be king, but he is also, like Isaac, the beloved son whose life will be offered as a sacrifice.

Now go to the top of the page and look at verse 10. Verse 10 says, “And just as he was coming out of the water”—just after Jesus was baptized—“he saw the heavens torn apart.” That is an odd expression, don’t you think? Both Matthew and Luke describe this same event only they say that the heavens were “opened.” That is such a nicer way of describing it. The heavens were opened like a door to God. But Mark says “the heavens were torn apart.” There is only one other place in Mark’s gospel where that expression “torn apart” is used. It is Mark 15:37-38: “Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn apart from top to bottom.”

Jesus baptism opens the door to God. Matthew and Luke make that clear, and Mark agrees. But even at Jesus’ baptism Mark hints at how Jesus will open the door to God. It will happen at Jesus’ death. Just as the heavens were torn apart at Jesus’ baptism, so at Jesus’ death the curtain of the temple is torn apart. The barrier in the temple that separates people from the presence of God is broken down once and for all, but it happens through Jesus’ death.

When Jesus is baptized he becomes a marked person in more ways than one. He is marked as God’s Son, the promised king, but he is also marked as the “beloved” son who is destined for sacrifice. He is marked as the one who will break down the barrier between us and God, but who will do so by giving his life on a cross.

This should give pause to any of you who have been baptized or who have brought your children for baptism or who are even thinking about it. If you think that baptism is a way of protecting yourself or your children, you may be mistaken. It certainly was not a way of protecting Jesus. Right after his baptism we are told in verses 12-13: “And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.” There is a sense in which we are protected by God in baptism. Even when Jesus was in the wilderness besieged by Satan and wild beasts, he was surrounded by God’s angels, whether he could see them or not. There is a sense in which baptism marks us off for God’s protection. But it also makes us vulnerable. It can make us a target, just like the tattoos on Christians in the Middle East. We are marked for attack as well as protection.

Many years ago before the fall of the Berlin Wall, *The National Geographic* did a story on East Germany. In the middle of the article there was an interview with an 18 year-old East Germany girl named Cornelia, who was planning to be baptized on Easter. The reporter asked what her friends thought about this. Cornelia said that a few of her friends belonged to a church, and more of them would like to, but they were afraid of how it would affect their careers. At that time in East Germany, Christians were sometimes excluded from universities or barred from certain jobs in education or government. The reporter asked Cornelia why she was willing to take that chance. Why risk her schooling or career in order to be baptized? She replied, “Because I believe in God.”

I wonder if you have thought about how your baptism may affect your career or your relationships or your life at school. It does, you know. Baptism is a life-defining event. Our first scripture reading from Romans compares it to dying and being reborn. The apostle Paul

says, “We have been buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”

One of the stories Fred Craddock tells in his book *Craddock Stories* is about his baptism at the age of 14. In his church people were submerged in water when they were baptized. On the day this happened to him, the minister reminded everyone in the congregation of the words we read this morning from Romans 6, about how in baptism we are raised to new life in Christ. Craddock says,

As I walked home with my wet clothes wrapped in a wet towel under my arm, I tried to think what that meant. You know, after you’ve been raised from the dead, you don’t look the same, sound the same, talk the same, do the same. But what do you do? How do you talk? What do you sound like? I went to school Monday morning thinking, *Is anybody going to know that I’ve been raised? Should I dress up a little better from what I’ve been dressing? It wouldn’t hurt. Do I talk another way? Do I throw in a verse of scripture now and then? What do I do at ball practice? Are they going to say, “Well, looks like he’s been raised from the dead.”* How do you talk? How do you walk? How do you relate? (pp. 92-93)

I am not sure I can answer all of those questions. But I do know that when you are baptized as a follower of Jesus Christ you become a marked person, just like Shirley Carlton’s Palestinian friend. When you are baptized you are marked with the cross of Christ on your forehead. It may not be tattooed there, but it will mark your life, if you let it. It will shape the way you talk to people and the way you talk about people. It will introduce a relationship into your life that is more important than money, more important than sex, more important than success, more important than even life itself, because it will give you a true life that lasts forever, a life that can never be taken away.

- Ken Onstot
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