

**Sermon on Mark 1:9-15 and 1 Peter 3:18-22**  
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This is the first Sunday in the season of Lent this year. During Lent, we journey together with Jesus toward Jerusalem and the cross, and on the way, we wonder about our relationship with God, about what is working and what might be that is getting in the way of our faith. For centuries, people have decided to give something up for Lent in order to focus more on their faith; seems like these days it mostly takes the form of giving up chocolate or TV. Or, people sometimes take on something new, something that will help someone else or something that might deepen one's own faith. So, why in the world would the passages for the day focus on baptism? What does that have to do with Lent? Well, if we think about baptism as an outward sign of God's marking us as one of God's own, it has everything to do with Lent.

The passages point toward our identity as the baptized people of Jesus Christ. We hear of Christ going to be baptized by John. Even though he was sinless, he goes down into the water with us, into the pain of our sin and repentance, and comes back up with us into the joy of new life. The passages remind us that in the symbolic waters of baptism, we have died with Christ, and we have been raised with Christ. 1 Peter says, "Christ suffered for sins once and for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God" (1 Peter 3:18).

The passage also says, "Baptism now saves you...through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:21).

Did you hear that incredible Good News? We are saved from death. It has been done. For some, this may mean that we are saved from the final death of our lives. And, I suppose it does mean there is more after death. We no longer have to fear that death is the final answer.

But, I think that the amazing part of the Good News we celebrate in baptism is that we are God's own, even before we are born, and we are saved from death right here, right now.

The ugliness, darkness, death, and pain that sin brings are not the final answer. We are given new life in Jesus Christ.

When asked his definition of good news, professor and theologian Peter Gomes said, “You don’t have to be as you are” (*Good News*, Stephanie A. Paulsell, *Christian Century*, December 16, 2008, 37). You don’t have to be as you are. Through Christ’s death and resurrection, which Christ claims for us in his baptism and in ours, we can be as we are created to be by God. We, as individuals, have the freedom in Christ to peel back the layers of sin covering the image of God within us. We, as a community, can turn away from that which distorts us and turn toward the kingdom of God together.

So are we looking for the newness of Christ in our lives, or are we forgetting our baptisms, content with less than what God created us to be?

Jan Richardson is an artist, writer, and United Methodist minister. Recently, she was asked to illustrate a book in black and white. She tried various mediums that just didn’t work. Finally, she picked up a piece of charcoal and fell in love with it. Even so, it took her a great while, many close decisions not to give up, and help from a friend to turn her initial sketches into something beautiful.

Richardson says, “For every artist, one of the most crucial habits to develop is staying open to what shows up...If I stay too attached to a favorite medium or familiar technique, I risk shutting myself off to possibilities that can take me to whole new places in my work and in my own soul.” (from *The Artful Ashes*, [www.paintedprayerbook.com](http://www.paintedprayerbook.com)).

We too risk getting stuck in our old ways. We risk forgetting that through our baptisms, God calls us to new places in our souls, in our lives. We become so caught up in our ways, some of them sinful, that we close our eyes to the possibilities of newness in Jesus Christ. We risk forgetting whose we are.

In reflecting on her experience with charcoal drawings, Richardson also reflects on the season of Lent. She says, “Ash Wednesday beckons us to cross over the threshold into a

season that's all about working through the chaos to discover what is essential...With its images of ashes and wilderness, Lent challenges us to reflect on what we have filled our lives with, and to see if there are habits, practices, possessions, and ways of being that have accumulated, encroached, invaded, accreted, layer upon layer, becoming a pattern of chaos that threatens to insulate us and dull us to the presence of God" (*The Artful Ashes*).

I would add the image of baptism to the ashes and wilderness at the beginning of Lent. The sacrament calls us out of our old, dead ways into abundant, new life. The sacrament calls us to pray with the Psalmist: "Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long" (Psalm 25, NRSV).

Where do you find yourself in your baptismal identity? Where do these baptismal texts call you? What has taken up residence in you that separates you from God through Jesus Christ and separates you from others? Are there ways you are living that keep you from the newness that God may be calling you to, that keep you from the ways of God, the God of your salvation?

The Good News is that in baptism, all of these things no longer need to have power over us. During this Lenten season, as we journey to the cross with Jesus, we remember our baptisms. We remember and rejoice that as Christ joined the sinners in line to be baptized by John in the Jordan, so too we join Christ in his dying and rising, and we are called God's own, forever.