Baptism of Jesus 11 January 2015

Baptism of Jesus Textweek
Lectionary readings from Vanderbilt Divinity Library.
Genesis 1: 1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1: 4-11

Today's gospel reading is the beginning of Mark's gospel (1:4-11).
It's the opening story. How books open is important. Perhaps even more important than the way they finish. The opening tells us what to expect, when we read on. It tells us what the writer is wanting to get across to us.
The opening story is Jesus being baptized by John in the River Jordan.
Throughout his gospel John would be saying that you needed to be ready for the coming age, for the time when God would rule the world. And to be ready, you had to repent, which meant re-directing yourself, turning around and setting off in a new direction, and confessing your sins, so that you could be forgiven.
And as a sign of your repentance, you were baptized. And baptism involved water – being immersed in water. The choice of water for 'baptism' is important.
You sometimes hear it said that that the water of baptism symbolizes cleanliness – washing away sin, so that, being cleansed, we can start afresh. And you can see how people might think that. We use water to wash in, to clean dirty things.
But washing wasn't the only action of which water was the symbol. Water also symbolised destruction, and when we look at it this way, we can see how it fits Mark's gospel perfectly.
Jesus getting into the water of the river Jordan was a symbol of his forthcoming destruction.
For Joshua, leading the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, the water was their destroyer. It was their enemy. It was preventing them from escaping. God intervened, they believed, and held back these waters of destruction, and let them cross over on dry land, to safety.

So by getting into the water at baptism, you were accepting destruction.
The water didn't save you. It overwhelms you. The water drowns you. It destroys you. In the water, you die. The water is what you need saving from.
So when Jesus is baptized, it means he is accepting his own coming destruction.
And so in these opening sentences, Mark is telling us that Jesus will be destroyed. He will suffer and die. Death will overwhelm him just as the water overwhelms him.
And so, Jesus' baptism, and our baptism, is the symbol of our destruction, and our death - the destruction and death of our self-interest, self-obsession, self-absorption, self-everything, that prevents us loving.
And it's only when we undergo this death, symbolized by immersing ourselves in water – the water of baptism – that we will be free to experience a new life on the other side of this death.
So today we thank John the Baptist. He brought the news of the coming age, and of what we must do about it.
And what we must do about it is to submit to our own destruction, so that we'll be free to accept our resurrection. We have to die before we can be raised by God.
The simplicity of this is terrifying. But it's also compelling.
Thanks be to God.

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