A watery solution: Mark 1:4-11; Genesis 1:1-5

by Barbara Sholis in the December 18, 2002 issue

The covenant for holy baptism, as found in the *United Methodist Book of Worship*, tells the biblical story of water. “Eternal Father,” the story begins, “when nothing existed but chaos, you swept across the dark waters and brought forth light. In the days of Noah you saved those on the ark through water. After the flood, you set in the clouds a rainbow. When you saw your people as slaves in Egypt you led them to freedom through the sea. Their children you brought through the Jordan to the land which you promised. In the fullness of time you sent Jesus, nurtured in the water of a womb.” From that first instant of creation, water has played midwife to God’s creation story.

The midwives of my own baptism were the church ladies of a Southern Baptist congregation. I was baptized on a warm April night in Kentucky. Candlelight in the rotunda reflected the sacredness of the moment as I waded into the warm water of the baptismal pool and let the pastor’s firm grasp cradle me. I held my nose and was submerged in the water of new birth while he invoked the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. When I came up out of the water, the bright light startled me. I saw my proud family. Then the church midwives, smelling of Jergens lotion and dressed in flowered shirtwaist dresses and strings of pearls, wrapped me in a warm towel and handed me my baptismal certificate. I tried to take it all in. Something had happened that night but I wasn’t quite sure what it was. As Heather Murray Elkins says, I had been sealed with the *imago Christi*, a permanent tattoo. Yet nothing was visible. What did this baptism mean for my life now?

I think of Robert Duvall in the movie *Tender Mercies*. Duvall plays Mac, a down-on-his-luck country songwriter who battles the bottle. He fights back with the help of a young widow who offers him room and board at her roadside Texas motel in exchange for handyman help. Grace finds a toehold in Mac’s life, and eventually both Mac and the widow’s young boy, Sonny, make the decision to be baptized. Driving home after the baptism, Sonny says to Mac: “Well, we done it Mac, we was baptized.” Peering into the truck’s rearview mirror, Sonny studies himself for a moment. “Everybody said I’d feel like a changed person. Do you feel like a changed person?” “Not yet,” replies Mac. “You don’t look any different, Mac.” “Do you think I look any different?” “Not yet,” answers Mac. Like Sonny, we don’t always see ourselves as changed people. There are times when we can perceive who and where we are only by looking into the rearview mirror and observing the people, places and events that have passed us by.

Likewise, those in the center of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus’ own disciples, are often looking into the rearview mirror, trying to figure out what just happened. Ironically, those on the periphery—the woman with the hemorrhage, the man possessed by the legion of demons, Jarius—know exactly who this Christ is. By the end of this first chapter, so do we. “And just as he was coming up out of the water,” Mark writes, “he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.’”

Scholar Donald Juel writes that it is at this moment that the barrier between heaven and earth is removed. No longer is God a distant, impervious God sitting on a throne in the distant heavens. God now comes to dwell among us. God is with us, and as Juel says, God “is on the loose in our realm” swooping into our world like a dove. Jesus, anticipated by John the Baptist as “the one who is coming,” comes down from the hills of Nazareth to the baptismal waters of the Jordan River, and the dove descends toward Jesus, signifying that this is the one who embodies God’s prophesy. Humanity’s relationship with God is transformed. The same creative force that moved across the formless void at creation now tears open the heavens and descends like a dove, making

incarnate this new covenant.

Inevitably, life has a way of “wringing us out,” and we forget that God dwells in and among us. We forget our “beloved” identity. Laurence Hull Stookey labels our forgetfulness “spiritual amnesia” but adds that baptism is what counters our amnesia. The touch of water upon our lives helps us recall our place in the biblical story, and reminds us that God’s creative force is still birthing us, claiming us, renewing us.

Many nights have come and gone since I passed through the waters of baptism that warm April night. At times life’s circumstances or my own regrettable choices have dimmed my remembrance of God’s promise for my life. At first glance into the rearview mirror, I still see only a rebellious creature. But if I really gaze into the mirror I also see a water mark, a permanent tattoo, that *Imago Christi*, reminding me of my baptism and the One who calls me to be the beloved daughter with whom God is well pleased.