

Holiness: Baptism: Mark 1: 9-15

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [March 1, 2000](#) issue

Lent is about preparation. Forty days: time for catechumens to prepare for baptism. Time to be ready for what is to come at the Easter vigil.

In Jesus's time, preparation was needed, for baptism was quite an event. Imagine several hundred people striding down to the river to be baptized, all at one go. Now *that* is the pilgrim people of God. That is as clear a political statement, as manifest an eschatological act, as one could wish for.

But it seldom happens like that today. It's not that the church's liturgy doesn't make a political statement: the very gathering together on a Sunday morning, let alone gestures like footwashing on Maundy Thursday, is deeply political. It's not that the liturgy is not eschatological: the gathering of great and small at the altar, the offering up of different gifts and the receiving back of the bread and wine—these are deeply eschatological. But what has happened to baptism?

Baptism is laden with political and eschatological energy. This energy is not principally about an individual making a decision. It is about God acting, and the community of faith responding. The Israelites did not "decide" to cross the Red Sea: God parted it, and they responded. The energy of baptism can fire even the most domestic of ceremonies. Our privatized liturgy is not unredeemable.

The preaching of the word at a baptism can bring out its political and eschatological energy by affirming the role of the community. The link between God and the community of believers in the liturgy is provided by the godparents. Even in a "private" baptism, the godparents represent the community of faith. And the role of the community of faith is vital.

What happens at baptism is that God places a song in the new believer's heart. And it is very easy for her, especially if she is around four months old, to forget the tune. So she has godparents. It is up to the godparents to learn the song so well that they can sing it back to her when she forgets how it goes. And what is the song? Well, the story of Jesus's baptism shows us. Three things happen in this story. The heavens are torn open, the Spirit descends like a dove, and a voice says, "This is my beloved

child.” Each of these events has great significance. This is how they might be explained to a new believer.

The beginning of the song is about tearing and it goes like this: *heaven is open to you*. Look at what happens in the story of Jesus: the gospel begins with the tearing of the heavens and ends with the tearing of the temple curtain. The veil between you and God has been torn apart. Heaven is open to you. There is no limit to God’s purpose for your life: it is an eternal purpose.

Now you may find that your godparents have an opinion when you are choosing a career. They may say don’t dive for cover, don’t just do what your parents did or want: *heaven is open to you*. The sky isn’t the limit. There is no limit. Or if a time comes when you are facing serious illness, even death, your godparents, knowing the song in your heart, may say: The angels are waiting for you, they know you by name. Heaven is *open* to you. Death is the gate to open heaven.

The second line of the song is about the dove: *God’s Spirit is in you*. Remember the end of the flood, when the dove brought the twig of new life back to Noah? Well, here is the dove descending on Jesus, bringing the gift of the Holy Spirit. You are now the temple of God’s Holy Spirit. You are the place where others will encounter God. God’s Spirit is in you.

If a time comes in your life when you feel alone and surrounded by hostility, you may hear a godparent gently whispering a tune: you may feel evil is all around you, but you can still worship, for God’s *Spirit* is in you. Or if a time comes when you are wildly successful, you may hear a sterner song: *God’s Spirit is in you*—everyone may worship you, but don’t forget who *you* worship. You may be cross with your godparent at the time, but she may be singing the song in your heart, and reminding you of your baptism.

So heaven is open to you, God’s Spirit is in you. The third line of the song of baptism is about the beloved: *you mean everything to God*. God’s words are, “This is my beloved Son.” These words mean that Jesus means everything to God, and everything God gives to Jesus he gives to us. You mean everything to God.

There may come a time in your life when you feel a deep sense of your own sin. Then you should hear your godparent say: You are everything to *God*. You still are, whatever you have done, however unworthy you feel. Or you may wander away from the church because God seems so distantly cosmic and ethereally vague, when

you long for intimacy and passion. Then you may hear your godparents sing, through their tears: You are *everything* to God. Remember your song.

This is what baptism is: God places a song in your heart. Your godparents' role is to learn that song so well that they can sing it back to you when you forget how it goes. And this is the song: heaven is open to you; God's Spirit is in you; you are everything to God. This is the song that makes your heart sing. And what does the song mean? I'll tell you. You are the song in God's heart, and God will never forget that song.