

Sunday, January 11, 2015: Mark 1:4-11

I eschew the danger of the river, but I know that it is where God leads me.

by [Diane Roth](#) in the [January 7, 2015](#) issue

"Have you ever done a river baptism?" We were in the church library when she asked it, a large group of us sitting in a circle and talking about baptism. Later at our evening service there would be two babies and a two-year-old baptized in the font in our small chapel. But for now, we were sitting around talking about what would happen that night, why it was important to us, and what we believed about it.

"I have been reading about river baptisms lately," she went on. "I think it would be really powerful to be baptized in a river."

I had to admit that while I wasn't against river baptisms, I had never done one. All of my baptisms have been indoors, in fonts of one sort or another, in places with walls and ceilings and central heating. When she first said "river baptism," I thought of the Mississippi, which flows not too far from our church. A baptism in the mighty Mississippi could be dangerous. You have to know what you are doing in a river.

Still, her fascination with river baptisms got me thinking—about the wildness of rivers, the wildness of creation, the wildness of baptism. Mark's account of Jesus' baptism is spare. There is no description of the people being baptized or of the scribes and the Pharisees watching. There is no conversation between Jesus and John. But there is this: Jesus is baptized in a river, in the wilderness. And when Jesus is baptized, he sees the heavens torn apart. Not just opened, as in Matthew and Luke, but *torn apart*. Opened heavens might plausibly be seen as good news. For them to be torn apart, however, seems dangerous, like the river.

But like the woman attracted to the power of a river baptism, so Israel yearned for a powerful God who would tear apart the heavens. In Isaiah 64, the cry goes up: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." It is the heart's cry of an Israel subdued, put down, mocked by those who would deny its God. Israel yearns for God to come and right wrongs, lift up the poor, set free the captives, bring power to the oppressed and healing to those who suffer.

When Jesus is baptized, God tears apart the heavens, and a voice declares the truth of Jesus' identity: "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." This has, more often than not, been the focus of the baptisms that take place around our font (not at the river), these words that I have marked as comforting. But at his river baptism Jesus is given not just an identity, but a mission—and his mission is not just comforting, but dangerous. This mission drives Jesus back to the wilderness to wrestle with the devil, and it leads him to places of suffering, chaos, and despair. When God hears the cries of the creation, God sends Jesus—armed with the power of the Holy Spirit and with his identity and mission as the Son of God.

The baptisms where I preside have been orderly and relatively tame. Still, I suspect that the danger of the river is present, that the heavens are again torn apart so that this new child of God bears with us both Jesus' name and his mission. It is both comforting and dangerous. The river with its power is present, even if we mostly miss this presence.

Sometimes I wonder if we can do more to point out that something powerful is happening at a baptism. Perhaps, like Annie Dillard once suggested, we should all wear crash helmets and life preservers. Perhaps we should issue warnings with our baptismal certificates: "This is a passport to places you never thought you would go, to be an emissary of the living God in the desert and the wilderness, to plant seeds of hope and healing and life."

The young woman's question haunts me, and not simply because I have never done a river baptism. It is because I realize that it is in part the dangerous possibility that holds me back, that makes me want to stay safe in a place with ceilings and heating, with order and liturgy. And when I wonder what about a river baptism attracts her, I know the answer: it's life. The life of the river attracts her, the idea that a river is flowing, moving, coming from somewhere and going somewhere else, receiving and giving life. When the heavens are torn open, something new emerges; a mystery once hidden is revealed, a presence once absent is now among us.

The heavens torn open mean that God is somehow with us in a new way. Not that God wasn't with us before, but that something new is being born—a different kind of relationship, both dangerous and comforting. The wildness of the river is not tamed by the font or by the order of the liturgy. God's words—"You are my Son, my child. With you I am well pleased"—promise us a wild ride into the current of God's justice, passion, and mercy.

Though I eschew the danger of the river, I know that it is where God leads me, because I bear God's name. God whispers in my ear and pushes me out to places I am afraid to go. This is what you get for having the water poured over your head, for being called a child of God—whether that water flowed in a river or a font.