

## **“Realigning with God”**

**Mark 1:1-11**  
**Baptism of the Lord**

**January 9, 2022**

**Rev. Dr. Andrew Kinsey**

*“You are my beloved son.”*

- **Mark 1:11**

### **Prayer of Preparation**

O God, may your Holy Spirit move among us so as to help us align our lives with your Son Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

### **Sermon**

Last week, when we shared about the importance of the prefix “re” for the Christian life, we focused on the notion of “rebooting,” or on the idea of resetting our lives in Christ. This week, as we remember our baptismal promises, we want to explore another word with the prefix “re”: realignment, or realigning.

In using this word, of course, I can’t help but think of how it conjures up images of a car, or of a truck. A cartoon captures the experience where the man says: “Well, for starters, I think it is time for an alignment job.” With wheels out! I am sure we all, at some point, have had to take our automobiles into the shop to get an alignment, or a realignment. That is typically how we understand this word.

In fact, when I did a little more digging, I ventured to a website called How Stuff Works. Name the invention, and this site will tell you how it functions. For example, with respect to cars, I found the following question: How do you know when your car needs to be “realigned”?

Quoting from the site, I discovered that “If you are wondering whether your car needs to be realigned, first look at your tires. Uneven tire wear is often a prime indicator that your car is likely out of alignment.” A few more indicators about

alignment include –

1. Your car seems to be drifting to one side.
2. Your steering wheel vibrates.
3. You are driving straight, but your steering wheel isn't centered.

The website goes on to say that “If none of these indicators occur, but it's been a while since your last alignment, check your owner's manual to see how often the manufacturer recommends having this service.”

But more: “The term alignment doesn't really refer to your car's wheels but rather to the suspension. As part of normal driving, parts of your car's suspension may become worn, and springs can be stretched out. Even a small accident or bumping a curb can disrupt your suspension, knocking some of the highly calibrated components off-kilter, making your wheels sit at improper angles. A re-alignment will ensure that your car drives straight and handles properly, making your ride safer.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Realigning with God**

Without going into detail from “Andy’s Auto,” I hope you can see the importance of having your car in good alignment.

With respect to our focus today, I hope you can see how we might want to talk about the importance of aligning or realigning our lives with God as one way to speak of our relationship with Christ; that is to say, I don’t know if your spiritual suspension is out of whack, or if your soul is pulling off in one direction or another, or if your life just isn’t centered; but if so, and if you have hit any potholes lately – you might want to consider what Jesus’ baptism reveals about getting “realigned.” In fact, when it comes to Jesus’ baptism, we can see how Jesus is aligning his heart with God’s heart, with God’s will, with God’s desire for his life and ministry.

I believe that there is a great deal to learn about our own relationship with God when we focus on Jesus’ baptism, and how we can renew our own baptismal vows: as renewing our baptismal vows is about realigning our lives with God, for

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Reverend Andy Bryan at Manchester United Methodist Church for this information on realignment at <https://manchesterumc.org/sermons/realignment>.

when we renew our vows, we are realigning our lives with God, receiving the instructions and readjustments we often need to make as we take this journey.

What I want to share is the importance of Jesus' baptism for our realignment: in Jesus' baptism by the John we read about one of the most significant events in Jesus' life and ministry, in how he aligns his life with God's life.<sup>2</sup> In all four Gospels, John and Jesus always come together.

In the account we read from Mark's Gospel, we see how John is preaching the gospel of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; and we read how he is preparing the way for the Messiah. He is a voice crying in the wilderness; and people are coming from all over to hear him (Mark 1:1-4).

It must have been quite a sight. I can imagine people going to the Crystal Cathedral in California or to the St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City to hear a preacher, but the wilderness? The waters of muddy Jordan River? John must have been an incredible preacher in his own right. I suppose it would be akin to us going to Greene County in southern Indiana, along the White River (which is really brown!). The preacher had better be good!

However, here at the beginning of Mark's Gospel, John the Baptist is setting the stage for what and who is to come. He is pointing to the One whose sandals he is unworthy to untie, to the Lamb of God who is taking away the sins of the world; he is speaking of the One who stands in the tradition of the prophets of the Old Testament, and to the One designated as God's own Beloved Son.

In other words, here is John a great preacher pointing to One who is "greater" than he is. John preaches judgment, but he is witnessing to the One who is the Judge. John baptizes with water, but he is pointing to the One who will baptize with the Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

And what is so life-changing is how Jesus himself submits humbly to John's baptism. Jesus stands in the Jordan River with John and receives from John the promises of God. Indeed, during Jesus' baptism something occurs that sets Jesus apart, that aligns his life with God's life and heart: the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus proclaiming that he is God's Son, fully human, fully

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<sup>2</sup> See *William H. Willimon's Lectionary Sermon Resource: Year C, Part I* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2018), 93.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

divine (Mark 1:10-11).<sup>4</sup> It is a mystery, to be sure, but in this moment, Jesus begins his mission with the confirmation that the fullness of God dwells in him; God holds nothing back. There is no lack of the Man-Jesus in God, and there is no lack of God in the Man-Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

## **Redefining God**

It is an important point, because what we are beginning to see in this Gospel is how in Jesus, there is a redefinition of God and humanity (another good word with the prefix “re” – redefinition). Our expectations of what divinity and humanity are, start to shift in Jesus.

In John’s Gospel, we get something similar: in that Gospel, we will get a picture of this redefinition, or of this realignment, when Jesus stoops to wash the feet of his disciples (John 13). It is a picture of God not just in power and glory but in humility and suffering weakness. Here is a God we don’t control to our own ends.<sup>6</sup>

For example, when someone asks me, “How can you believe in God with all the suffering in the world?” I suspect that the questioner is working with a limited understanding of God as a “supreme being” who controls us like puppets, or whose essence of God is some kind of “unconstrained power,” rather than the God who was in Christ reconciling the world to himself in love on a cross (2 Cor. 5:14).<sup>7</sup>

I think this is one of the frustrating things about being a Christian as we try to find appropriate ways of saying, “Well, tell me who the God is you don’t believe in because I bet that we Christians don’t believe in that God either.”<sup>8</sup>

In the River Jordan that day, a great realignment was taking place, which redefined God, and which realigned both humanity and divinity, so that never again would people think “humanity” or “God” without thinking of Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, if we are seeking a God we can domesticate, we are not seeking God at all, or Jesus and the Holy Spirit for that matter. A Jesus we can handle is no

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 97.

Jesus at all, and a Spirit we can manipulate is no Holy Spirit, as the Spirit blows where it wills (John 3:8).<sup>10</sup>

When the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus, and when God calls out Jesus as Beloved, it is a new ball game. Here is a God who is in solidarity with us in the waters of the Jordan River, and whose own Son submits to baptism, a reminder to us that we too must submit to God in baptism and that we too must align our lives with him.<sup>11</sup>

To be sure, it is a lifelong task to think about God with all the complexity that God is present to us in such moments, just as it was in a manger, or an upper room, or a cross. We all are human after all – all too human. In the course of our journeys of faith, we are always looking through what the apostle Paul says is a glass darkly; we don't see the whole picture (1 Cor. 13:10). It is a stance that requires humility. And yet, what we receive in baptism is the full promise of Jesus' divinity and humanity. We receive the message that we our God's children, wherever we live, whoever we are.

Indeed, we preachers are often stressing the importance of how we Christians ought to be givers. In our worship, we often speak of a moment of gratitude in what we give, and we need to do so. And yet, as we share in our baptismal renewal, I would like to invite you today to become good receivers. Yes, we are blessed when we give, but we are also blessed when we are open enough to be surprised to receive what God wants to give us. After all, all that we have of our faith we have received from God, from others. None of us was born Christian. Someone had to tell us this faith. Someone had to pass it on to us. We had to receive it, and to be open to the notion that God is always other than the God we had previously conceived.<sup>12</sup> It is why anyone who attempts to be open to God in baptism must also be receptive to the unexpected, to the God of surprises.

What this means for us is that we all stand in constant need of realignment, or of receiving God's grace anew so that we may continue to encounter God daily, realizing that in baptism God holds nothing back: in baptism, God pulls back the curtain and reveals to us who Jesus is and who we are as children of God, loved by the Most High, claimed in the waters of grace, and placed on the way of righteousness.

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 97.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 86.

That is the invitation we all receive today. Now God calls to come and celebrate it! Amen.