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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
The Baptism of the Lord, Year B
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About My Father's Business
Mark 1:4-11

There's a great scene in the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou*. These three jailbirds—Everett, Delmar, and Pete—just escaped from the chain gang—are on a wild adventure through rural, Depression-era Mississippi. They're driving along in their stolen vehicle. Just come from the river, where they'd stumbled upon an old-fashioned baptismal service. Pete and Delmar had plunged right into the waters and got baptized, thinking that if their sins were forgiven by God, the State of Mississippi would also oblige. But Everett knew better, and so he held out.

Well, as they drive along from there, they soon come upon a fork in the road, and they pick up a hitchhiker, a young man who turns out to be the blues musician, Tommy Johnson. Tommy tells them that—just last night at that very crossroad—he had sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for being able to play a mean guitar. When Everett—the cynic of the bunch, played by George Clooney—when Everett hears this, he remarks: “Well ain't it a small world, spiritually speaking?! Pete and Delmar just been baptized and saved. You sold your soul to the Devil. I guess I'm the only one that remains unaffiliated.”

It's a funny line, in a funny movie. But the truth is, of course, there's no such thing as being spiritually “unaffiliated.” As the great theologian Bob Dylan once said, “You're gonna have to serve somebody. It may be the Devil or it may be the Lord. But you're gonna have to serve somebody.”

And baptism is our way of declaring Who it is that we serve.

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I've often wondered what it was that made Jesus go get baptized. It seems a peculiar thing for him to do, doesn't it? The Gospel says that John's baptism was a “baptism of repentance, for the forgiveness of sin.” So what does the sinless Son of God need to be baptized for, exactly? I mean: he, of all people, should be exempt from this.

You can picture him standing high up on the river bank, and watching all the others get baptized. Now they're the ones who really need to come for baptism! Those who messed everything up, who need a second chance, who've gone so far astray that nobody but God can help them. Let them come. But Jesus?! What is Jesus doing here? That's what John says: “Jesus, you should baptize *me*! I should not be baptizing *you*!”

But Jesus comes anyway, and presents himself for baptism. Mark doesn't tell us what Jesus' motivation was. Maybe it was in the synagogue, listening to the rabbi read the Scripture. Or maybe it was just when he was praying on his own one day, when something suddenly strikes him, and says, “That's it! Now's the time!” I don't know how it happened.

But what I think Jesus is doing here is this. You remember how, when he was twelve years old in Jerusalem, for the Passover. And he managed to get separated from his parents. They couldn't find him anyplace. They looked everywhere, and finally found him in the Temple, conversing with the priests and scribes. And Jesus said, “Didn't you know I must be about my Father's business?”

He said that just to Mary and Joseph, when he was a kid. But with his baptism, eighteen years later, it's like he's now saying that to everyone who's on hand to witness it: "From now on," he says, "I must be about my Father's business."

Jesus' baptism is a way of showing everybody—showing others, showing God, maybe most of all showing himself—that, from now on, he is going to be committed to the things of God. He's not "unaffiliated," you see. His whole purpose in life is going to be about serving God, and serving other people.

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Now our baptism is different from Jesus' baptism, of course. We don't have all the special effects—the heavens opening, the doves descending, the voice of God coming out of the clouds. But in at least this one respect, our baptism is like his. Whenever we gather around the font, it's a way for us to declare who we ultimately belong to.

Presbyterians talk about baptism as being a kind of "seal" on us. Which, I never really got the "seal" business, until I started thinking about the seal that I have in my desk drawer. It's something I got maybe fifteen, twenty years ago, that I use to stamp my books. First thing I do, when I get a new book. I open it up to the title page, get out my seal, and stamp down in the corner. It leaves an embossed seal on there: "From the library of Wallace W. Bubar." It's *my* book now. I bought it. I paid for it. I acquired it. It belongs to me. Now I may loan it out, but I want it back when you're done, and there's that little reminder there of who this book belongs to, just so you won't forget. It's my seal.

Well, in baptism, God has put his seal on us. Stamped us as belonging to him. And that's true whether you got dunked in a big pool, or just had a teaspoon of water trickle down your forehead. Whether it was your decision to do it, or a decision your parents made for you. Whatever kind of church it was, however old you were—it doesn't matter. The fact is that once you've been baptized—like it or not—you belong to God. You don't belong to yourself anymore, if you ever did. God has put his seal on you. You belong to God now. In fact, there is no part of yourself that does not belong to God. God has a claim on all of it.

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I heard a story a few years ago about a man. He was attending a baptismal service. Some kind of Pentecostal church, or something. He'd attended the church for some time, but had never been baptized. Never made that commitment publicly. But then one Sunday morning, something moved him.

I don't know what it was. But on this particular Sunday, when the invitation was given after the sermon, this man went down to the front. He told the preacher that he wanted to be baptized. Right then and there. No point in waiting around. Let's just do it. Just in his street clothes, even. (Pentecostals can do this, you know.) Jumped right into the baptistery. Confessed his faith. Turned his life over to Jesus. Baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. It was wonderful!

Only problem was: the man had been in such a hurry to get baptized—he was so overcome by the Spirit—that he forgot to take his wallet out of his back pocket before he jumped into the baptistery.

Well, now, that's a real shame. I mean, a wallet is a sacred thing for a man! Your whole life—your whole identity—is in there! I guess it's the same for a woman's purse, I don't know. But you can tell an awful lot about a man just by looking through his wallet. You've got pictures of him and his family. You can see how much money he has. Where he lives. What school did he go to. Who does he work for. What credit cards he uses. Where he shops. Which airline he

flies. Which political party he's affiliated with. What organizations he's a member of. Whether he's an organ donor or not. It's all right there in the wallet. His whole life!

Well, this poor guy took his wallet out of his pocket. It was soaking wet. The leather was cracked and discolored. That water had gotten into everything! Those bills, soggy as all-get-out. His insurance card, stuck to his library card, stuck to his Genuardi's Club card. The ink on the cards, smeared all over the place. The color on the photographs, bled so much there wasn't any resemblance there anymore. His whole wallet was just absolutely ruined.

But you know, over time, he came to realize something very interesting. He never looked at his wallet in quite the same way again. Ever since it got baptized along with him. He realized that God had a claim on it now—on his whole life, in fact. Not just his soul. Not just spiritual things. But everything in his life belonged to God.

After that, every time he opened his wallet up to spend money, it made him wonder, "Am I being a good steward of these resources? How can I bring honor to God, and promote more justice—more fairness—in the way I do business? How can I be a more generous person?" See, once you're baptized, you start thinking differently about these things.

One of those membership cards in there was for an all-white club that didn't allow black members. It had never really bothered him before, being a member of it. But now that that card had been baptized—oh, it started bothering him! He wound up resigning his membership in protest, and joining the YMCA instead.

When he went to the voting booth in November, and they asked to see his voter registration card—I mean, you could hardly read the thing, it was so smudged up—but it made him think differently about how he would cast his ballot. He started asking himself: "Do these people I'm voting for—do they care about the things Jesus cares about?"

I mean, every time he reached into his wallet after that, he did so with the awareness that he was a Christian. Not just in church. Not just on Sundays. But all the time. In all the mundane things of life. He was now a servant of God, doing God's work in the world.

That man came to realize that his wallet wasn't ruined, as he initially thought. It was redeemed! Redeemed, is what it was.

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Well, that's what God wants to do to us. To all of us. Every part of us, without exception. To immerse us so fully in his love, to wash us so thoroughly in his mercy, that we will be transformed from head to toe. That we will know ourselves—deep down—to belong to him: body, mind, soul, spirit, wallet, everything. That even—long after we've dried out from our baptism—we'll know God's seal is still imprinted on us. And understand that whatever else we may be about in life, we, too, must be about our Father's business.

Amen.