

## **“Light Through the Veil”**

*Reading: Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:4-11*

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

You’ve probably heard it said that the two things you don’t bring up in polite conversation are politics and religion. And to a certain extent that’s just good advice, since of course those are two topics that are bound to devolve into heated argument in most settings. But it also illustrates the struggle that our world has when it comes to religious things in the public sphere. Obviously religion, generally speaking, is a major force in our world today, as has just been tragically demonstrated by the terrorist attacks in France in recent days. To what degree should faith play a role in a person’s public life, or in our public policy? To what degree should the majority’s faith control policy for the minority? How much good does religion really do for society, anyway? Some people think of all religions as basically the same, and when a person’s religion leads them to murder a bunch of innocent people, then religion is at best something you should keep to yourself and at worst a serious threat to civilization.

Obviously Christians hold a different viewpoint: not all religions are the same, and our faith would never lead us to commit violence against those who disagree with us. But there’s still that question for many people about how integrated our faith should be with the rest of our lives. How far removed is Sunday morning from Monday through Saturday? How distant is God from work and family and recreation? Many people, even among Christians, I think, would really prefer it if God is rather private, like a diagnosis or a bad habit.

But today, when we celebrate the baptism of Jesus, we can’t see God that way. This story at the beginning of the gospel denies us the easy comfort of a distant, uninvolved, private sort of God. God is not merely a concept or an idea on this day. His religion is not simply a philosophy for living a fulfilled life, and it doesn’t make for good viewing on an afternoon talk show. He is not easily distilled down to some phrases and moldy, mumbled words. He is instead an interfering, present, look-you-in-the-eye kind of God.

The baptism of Jesus is yet another of those strange Bible stories, because baptism means many things, but few if any of them would seem to apply to Jesus. Baptism at that time in Judaism was often used as an act of ritual purification. John’s baptism was explicitly for the repentance of sins, and our baptisms today still involve the understanding that we are baptized as a sign of dying to sin. But Jesus was without sin. Our baptisms today are also an initiation into the church, a public declaration of being incorporated into the body of Christ. Jesus is the head of the church. Matthew’s telling of the story even includes John the Baptist objecting to Jesus’ baptism: “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” he asked. Even while it was happening, there was confusion about its meaning.

But we are in the season after Christmas, and last Sunday was Epiphany. It’s a season of light: the light grows on the Advent wreath until we reach Christmas when all the candles are lit as a sign of the birth of the Light of the World, and last Sunday we celebrated the shining of that light out into the nations that were otherwise far from God and living in the darkness. That image of light is not always used to describe Jesus and what He is doing in the gospel stories, but what is always there is the sense that Jesus is revealing to us what God is like, what God wants from us, and what God wants us to

know about Him. So the image of light doesn't show up in every gospel story, but every gospel story is revealing something to us. Especially here at the beginning of the story, the stage is being set, the foundation is being laid, and important things are being revealed to us about what Jesus is doing. Mark's gospel in particular is known for being brief and to the point. He doesn't waste words. Everything is there for a reason. So what does this baptism reveal to us? What light does it shine?

There are many layers to the baptism of Jesus. It's a theologically complicated event. However, one thing that it does is that it shines the light of God on us through the veil. It brings God into clearer focus than we've had before, and it's an unexpected image that we're presented with. The curtain is pulled back, in a sense. The fog lifts, and what we see in this light is an unexpected God. This is not a distant God. This is not a vague, blurry, nebulous God. This is not a God who is hiding or reluctant or uninvolved. This is not a God confined to words on a page or thoughts in your head or ideas floating around in a philosophical discussion. This is a present God, a walking God, a getting-wet-in-the-river God. There is still impenetrable mystery and unstoppable power, to be sure. But a light is now shining through the veil in a way that we have not seen before.

What do I mean by that? I mean that so much of religion has traditionally relied on things you can't see. So much of religion relies on mystery and suggestion and imagination. That's not a bad thing, of course, because again, God is far, far greater than what we can sense or understand. Sometimes it's helpful for us to use images and senses and analogies to point us in the right direction for knowing God. But it's also true that in many cases throughout history, the true God has been masked by religious practices that assume He cannot be known. For many people throughout history and even today, God is hidden behind a veil. And the intent may be to reinforce the fact that God is too great to be comprehended, but too often that becomes an excuse not to know God.

The phrase "hocus pocus," according to one theory, comes from the Latin phrase *hoc est corpus meum*, meaning "this is my body." The theory goes that in the days when the Eucharist was conducted in Latin and nobody else understood it, "hocus pocus" became an imitation of worship words as a sort of magical incantation. The actual meaning of what was happening was veiled by inscrutable language. The presence of God was replaced by mystery and magic, at least in some people's minds. In the temples of some religions even today, an idol or a holy place might be screened off, literally veiled so that normal people can't get too close to or even see the real worship taking place. That was how the Jewish temples of the Old Testament were constructed. People wanted to worship God, but He was too great, too holy, too *other* to be approached without very special preparation. And when God does actually appear or speak or send a messenger to someone, usually the experience is overwhelming and often stretches the bounds of description, or God is wrapped in blazing light or fire or clouds of smoke, or at best we can catch a glimpse of His attendants. God is usually so apart from us that He is indescribable.

I recently caught part of a travel show on TV that was following a group of Westerners who were travelling some of the ancient pilgrimage routes along the Ganges River in India. What struck me was that, at least as the show presented it, most of these people didn't seem very interested in finding any kind of god by visiting these ancient religious sites. They seemed interested in the travel and the history and the excitement and the enlightenment, but even looking for some approximation of God didn't seem to be on their agenda at all. And when God is hidden behind smells and bells —

and that's how much of religion has been done for centuries — the danger is that we get stuck on the things pointing us to God rather than God Himself, and God remains hidden in mystery.

But this baptism of Jesus shatters the illusion that God cannot be known. In this remarkable moment, we see God revealing Himself in incredibly intimate terms, far more so than had been done before. The light of God shines through the veil of mystery, and we see God being *present* rather than *hidden*. We see God revealed as existing in Trinity: God the Father speaks, God the Spirit descends, and God the Son walks among us. We see the three Persons of the Godhead, distinct and yet united. We see God's mysterious being revealed to us in ways we cannot comprehend, and yet He is still revealing Himself to us, and He shows us that the Trinity exists in unity toward a purpose. We see blessing, humility, presence, love: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." The mission of Jesus is the means of God's approval. In this moment of baptism, we see the transcendent, incomprehensible, mysterious God, who is normally wreathed in fire or light or smoke, but here He is revealing Himself not in power or overt glory or majesty, but in love, and humility, and presence.

This God cannot be hidden behind any veil we might construct. Though paintings and buildings and songs and incense can help us to focus on God, the small things of this earth can neither conceal nor replace this God. He is present and He is personal. Though He is great and majestic, He comes near us to be known by us. He steps out of the smoke and fire and takes on our flesh so that we might know Him for eternity.

Last Sunday we talked about the many ways God uses light as a way to reveal Himself and how He's at work in our world. God also loves using water as an image of His work; He loves using the earthy elements of our reality so that we can get a better hold on what He's doing. Just as light was part of the beginning of creation — God's first recorded words were, "Let there be light!" — so, too, was water part of what God did at the start. As we read in Genesis 1, at the very beginning there were the chaotic waters over which God's Spirit brooded, and from those waters and God's commands came form and beauty and life. Water is the stuff of life, and here we once again see God descending on the waters, this time the Jordan River, to begin a creative act. In Genesis He created the universe; in this baptism, He works to create a new nation of people defined by repentance and trust in the God that they know and love and follow.

There are, in a sense, a couple of baptisms taking place here. There is the baptism of John, which we learn is "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." John is a controversial figure, one who stirs people up and makes people mad and demands change. And even though Jesus is sinless and has no need of a baptism of repentance, He still begins His ministry with this act, this blessing on the meddling repentance of John. If we want to know more about the priorities of this God who is revealing Himself here, we see that He is placing His stamp of approval on what John is doing. Calling people to turn from their sin, to change their hearts and come to God is exactly what Jesus is looking for; there is no more appropriate forerunner to the ministry Jesus is about to begin. And we see that the Father is placing His stamp of approval on the humility displayed by Jesus the Son: again, this is God revealed in humility and love. Jesus will boldly call others to repentance, but He does so with the humility of one who will not even defend Himself when crucified.

The other baptism taking place, or at least being foreshadowed, is a baptism of the Holy Spirit. John says that he baptizes with water, but Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit. And indeed, we see

the Spirit “descending on Him like a dove,” placing His seal on the Father’s words of love and blessing in response to the humility displayed by Jesus the Son. The baptism that the church continues today is a visible sign of this baptism of the Spirit, because as we read throughout the book of Acts in the early days of the church, those who come to Christ are normally then baptized with the Spirit. We repent of our sins, we trust in Jesus Christ, and His Spirit seals us as His own. It is a creative act, just like His brooding over the waters of the primordial universe: He broods over us, forming us into the creation we were meant to be. This is a sign of the presence of God, not just *with* us, but *in* us, replacing our fallen spirit with His own perfect Spirit.

This is the light of the revelation of who God is and what God is doing. This is the transcendent God who is so different than us setting aside His majesty and coming near to us in humility, presence, and love. This is not a God who stays hidden or unknown or behind a veil. No, God has come near. In this new year, come into the light of walking closely with Christ.



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