

Known By a Watermark
Mark 1:4-11
January 11, 2009

Money has been much in the news lately – and short in supply. If you still have some left, pull out a bill and take a good look at it. The United States Department of Treasury has been redesigning our currency in recent years to protect it from counterfeiting. They are no longer just green bills with black ink. They've got various other symbols, words, and colors encoded on them. This ten dollar bill continues to feature Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton. To the left of Hamilton in light red ink is the torch from the Statue of Liberty; on the right side there is a smaller, darker version of the same torch and above it the words, "We the People," all in red. In the right hand bottom corner there is a copper colored 10, but if you tilt the bill, it supposedly changes to green. Just above that 10 is an oval frame where it looks like they forgot to put someone's portrait. But if you hold it up to the light, you can see a faint image of Alexander Hamilton face. That's the watermark.¹

A watermark is a light-colored, often gray, image or text that appears in the background of a paper. It is a secondary image that is overlaid on the primary image as a means of protecting it. We often find watermarks on the internet now to prevent illegal use of copyrighted material. Sometimes the watermark is visible. It is often the logo or seal of the organization to which the paper or work belongs. Sometimes watermarks are invisible and can only be detected with appropriate technology.

The purpose of a watermark is to validate the authenticity of the item. The watermark tells those with whom we exchange currency, "This bill is real. It is genuine. It is reliable."

This morning we hear a story of watermarks, the watermark of baptism. People flocked to John the Baptizer at the Jordan River where he baptized them into a changed life. John didn't just mark these folks with a few sprinkles of water. He immersed them full body into the river. Baptism by immersion is symbolic of drowning to an old way of life and being raised to a new life. But John was clear with those who ventured out in the wilderness for baptism by water. He said, "This is the visible watermark, the outward act of proclaiming your desire to live a new life. Jesus is coming, and he will enhance baptism by offering the gift of the Holy Spirit. That's the invisible watermark that will rewire your inner circuitry. The Holy Spirit will connect you directly to God. Through that channel you will receive guidance and inspiration for your living. In this way, your watermark will become visible in your actions, words, and lifestyle. Jesus offers the authentic, redesigned watermark that will give your life and your inner being a new look."

Baptism is the watermark that identifies a Christian. In receiving the sacrament of baptism, we have been blessed with the water symbolic of cleansing old ways and being freed to claim the new ways of Christ. Several years ago the United Methodist Church redesigned its liturgy of baptism. It went back to the earliest known ritual of baptism from the church in the fourth century. For many of us, the wording felt like a step back in time and away from the emphasis on grace that is the tradition of John Wesley and Methodism. Later in our service we're going to participate in part of that liturgy as a reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant, so I want to shed some light on it.

The questions that we ask and answer in baptism are of two kinds. First are the Renunciations, those things that we renounce as Christians. Second are the Adhesions, those things to which we cling, as with tape. Remember the image of immersion, drowning to an old way in order to rise to a new way of life. The Renunciations and Adhesions are the verbal way of proclaiming this.

The first question is "Will you turn away from the powers of sin and death?" We will respond, "We renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of our sin!" We pledge to discern the ways of wickedness and reject them, to say NO. It is like screening for counterfeit bills; we can easily be tempted to follow avenues that promise to lead to fulfillment, but which are only bogus.

The second question is, "Will you let the Spirit use you as prophets to the powers that be?" We are not left alone in our discernment and renunciation of evil, injustice, and oppression. Through the Holy Spirit, God empowers us to be discerning and courageous in our resistance. As we stay close to God in Christ, we will be able to resist any imitations.

It makes me think of a man who was hired to paint lines on a newly resurfaced portion of the interstate highway. The first day he painted 109 miles and his supervisor, impressed by such an effort, told him he would recommend a promotion and raise in pay if he kept up that pace. But the next day he was able to paint only five miles. On the following day he did only one mile and when he reported in at quitting time he was fired. "It isn't my fault," he muttered as he walked away shaking his head. "I kept getting farther away from the can."

We need to remember to take the can, or rather the font of living water, with us as we journey through life. Sometimes we get so far from the source of faith that we dry out and shrivel up. The watermark reminds us to stay in touch with the Spirit of God who fuels and guides us throughout the journey of life.

Up until this point in the ancient liturgy, the candidates for baptism faced west because west is the direction of the sunset, the direction of night, and hence symbolically the direction of darkness and evil. When the priest began the questions of adhesion, the people would physically turn from west to east. East is

the direction of sunrise, the direction of daylight, the direction, symbolically, of resurrection and new life.

The candidates are invited to embrace that new life. “Will you proclaim the good news and live as disciples of Jesus Christ, his body on earth? Will you be living witnesses to the gospel, individually and together, wherever you are, and in all that you do? Will you receive and profess the Christian faith as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments?” These are among the positive things that we claim, the elements that mark us as followers of Christ. They are a combination of invisible or internal and visible or external watermarks by which followers of Jesus are known.

The Protestant Reformer Martin Luther would frequently claim the watermark of baptism. He repeatedly found himself in conflict with others as he sought to create a movement more faithful to the way of Christ. He would often pause and place his hand on his head and say to himself, “I am baptized.” It was as if he was reclaiming his watermark, remembering his pledge to adhere to the way of Christ and the promise of God, that he, too, was God’s Beloved. The watermark of baptism gave him assurance to move forward with the work of ministry to which he was called.

It is helpful for us, too, to remember our baptism. Many of us were baptized as infants or children and have no or little real remembrance of it. Others were baptized as youth or adults and were conscious participants in those sacred moments. The United Methodist Church believes in one baptism. No matter which church in which you were baptized, you were baptized into the Body of Christ. We are not baptized Methodist or Baptist or Catholic. We are baptized Christian. There is one baptism. Today I invite you to remember your baptism, and to renew our baptismal covenant with God. It is not a rebaptism because how many baptisms are there? ONE! In this renewal we say NO to that which is not of God and we say YES to those things and ways which are of God. We remember God’s promise to Jesus and to us, the promise of baptism, “You indeed are God’s Beloved, chosen and marked by God’s love.” We remember the watermark that penetrates our soul and inspires us to Christ-like living.

In case you’ve strayed far from the font of living water, this is an opportunity to splash in the waters once again and ask God to renew your faith. In case your watermark has faded or dried up, this is a chance to be showered anew by God’s grace and love and bring fresh life to birth. Perhaps you are growing in your faith and you desire to wade deeper into the river of life, planting your roots ever deeper in faith. Today the water of grace is flowing for you, my friends.

ⁱ www.moneyfactory.gov.