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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

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Mark 1:1-14

The Beginning

Hutterthal Mennonite Church, good morning! We're all in this together! We worship in a limited form, but we earnestly await a time when church can return to some normalcy. Let's pray!

That day, the weather was cool, damp, windy, and rainy. I remember running to the hot tub and stepping into the much more comfortable warm water. My uncle, a pastor of a small community church not far from home, took me by the arm and turned me around. He then asked me a few questions as I crossed my arms across my chest. I said yes to all of them, though I cannot remember what they were. Then he quickly swept me backwards under the surface of the warm water of the hot tub and brought me back out. I quickly jumped out of the tub and ran back inside. My family was watching from the window because of the weather. My mother was standing inside the door, waiting with a towel. My baptism was complete.

I was twelve when I got baptized. Not long before my baptism, my family left the church, in which I had spent my childhood. We had yet to find a church home, so I had asked my mother if my uncle could baptize me. I had felt led to this next step in my faith journey. Something had changed developmentally for me in that time period of my life. Suddenly Jesus's sacrifice on the cross meant something different as I began to notice the feelings of shame and conviction that I would have after doing something mean or inappropriate. I realize now that I was first beginning to notice the repercussion of sin and brokenness in the world, which meant that Jesus's sacrifice for our collective sins began to mean something much more personal and intimate. The spirit was

leading me in ways that I did not realize as a young adolescent, but I do remember listening closely. Mom suggested that we talk to my uncle about baptizing me, so I had a few conversations with him, and he agreed to it. I will never forget my baptism.

I will also never forget how little I understood about baptism. In my mind, it was the next step in my faith journey, a public proclamation of my inner conviction and commitment to Jesus as personal savior. I didn't quite think of Jesus as Lord yet, nor did I realize the communal aspects and commitments of baptism. I do not remember being taught that baptism could also function as a commitment to and entrance into a particular faith community. I also did not realize at that time that my baptism was only the beginning of a much longer, more intimate journey of getting to know Jesus better and more intimately in community. Only a few months after my baptism, I was invited to attend a youth group not far from my home. Once our family had found a church that we attended every week, it ended up being too far from home for me to attend any other activities besides the Sunday morning service. A friend at school asked if I wanted to come to youth group with her. This youth group soon became my church, my community. I gave my first "sermon" a little over a year later in this community of adolescents. The youth pastor noticed my passion for Jesus and my gifts, encouraging leadership formation in me as I grew older and studied more. I soon began leading music with my guitar, ministering in ways that I continue to this day, except when COVID prevents. All of that to say that my baptism started a journey of growth and formation that I did not realize until much later. The Holy Spirit worked in and through me, leading me toward Jesus and a community, in which I could flourish.

Mark 1:1-14 inspired me to reflect on my own baptism. I wonder what you all remember from your baptism. When I think about the story of Jesus's baptism by John the Baptist, I realize how little of the surrounding story that Mark gives us. Scholars think that Jesus was around 30

when he was baptized and started his ministry in the Galilean countryside. Even Mark in verse 1 writes of this baptism experience for Jesus as the beginning of the story. Mark does not have a nativity story like Matthew and Luke. Mark mentions nothing of Jesus's birth or early life. For Mark, the beginning of the gospel story is John the Baptist in the Jordan River baptizing Jesus of Nazareth. Was baptism your faith story's beginning?

I wonder about all that Mark is not telling us in this moment, what he is leaving out of the story. Jesus grew up and worked as a carpenter or craftsman in Nazareth, most likely spending his work time as a day laborer for the Roman empire in nearby large urban centers, such as Sepphoris or Tiberius. I wonder how much time Jesus had spent with John prior to this experience. They were close in age as is revealed in Matthew and Luke. How many of us have fond memories of visiting our cousins or relatives during our growing up years?

John very well could have been quite influential in Jesus's decision to quit working and head toward the Jordan near Judea where Jesus was baptizing. Maybe Jesus and John had spent considerable time talking about the scriptures, for us, what is the Old Testament, but for them, was the only bible that they had. Maybe John and Jesus held people in the Old Testament such as Elijah or King David as heroes. We know so little of this period of Jesus or John's lives. Something has inspired the two of them to be in this same place and time at the Jordan River. John knows that something special is going to happen. It has been 400 years since anyone has heard from God. Some have come already claiming to be the Messiah. The Maccabees had liberated Israel many years earlier from the Romans, but everyone knew how that had turned out. The Romans came back to Jerusalem like the Babylonians had several hundred years before them with larger armies and vengeful hearts. This time, they crushed the rebellion and the royal family, humiliating Israel by desecrating the temple and showing who was really in charge. The

Romans laid waste to Jerusalem, showing that whoever this God of the Israelites was, he or she was no match for the power and strength of Rome.

After introducing Jesus in verse 1 as Christ or Messiah and Son of God, Mark begins the story immediately with a reminder of what has been predicted by the prophets previously. Mark hearkens us as his readers and hearers to remember where the story ended previously in the scriptures with predictions of a messenger heralding the arrival of the Messiah. Mark is telling his readers that the promised liberator and savior of Israel is here in the person, Jesus. Israel's God has come as the human Jesus to his people like he had promised he would. Mark begins his story with his ending conclusion, which is that Jesus is the one that Israel has been waiting for. Mark is going to tell the rest of the good news or gospel of Jesus the Messiah in the following narrative.

Mark then introduces John the Baptist, Jesus's cousin, mentor, and friend. John has chosen a different path from his family, becoming a wilderness teacher and preacher outside of the temple establishment in Jerusalem. But his message is attracting many people from the center of power in Jerusalem as they come to him to be baptized. Mark portrays John in the tradition and dress of Elijah, the great prophet, who is preparing the way for the soon-coming Messiah. Many in Israel were expecting one like Elijah to come in advance of Israel's liberator and true king, the Messiah. John the Baptist is careful to remind those who have come to see and hear him that he is not the Messiah, only a precursor of what is to come. The one coming will be much greater than John, the bringer of the promised Holy Spirit. When the Messiah would come, the prophet Joel had predicted that a fresh outpouring of the Spirit of God would come too, and John the Baptist is convinced that now is the time predicted. Messiah is coming, so the people must repent and be baptized in preparation.

Jesus travels from Nazareth to the portion of the Jordan River in Judea, a several-day walk, to be baptized by John, probably having heard of how popular John has become. Interestingly, we do not hear much though about their mothers, Mary and Elizabeth who are much larger characters in Luke and Matthew. Claiming that Messiah was coming was as much a political statement in the first century as it was a religious one. Messiah was supposed to liberate Israel from its rulers and return Israel to its former glory as when David and Solomon were kings. Messiah would free Israel from Rome and set the world as it should be. It was not going to be long, and John would be noticed by the authorities and leaders in Jerusalem, Roman and Jewish. The Romans were quick to snuff out any and all talk of dissent or revolution, usually by crucifixion. Elizabeth had to have been worried about John's choice to go out into the wilderness, teaching repentance and a soon-coming Messiah. I wonder what Mary was thinking when her eldest son said that he was going to get baptized by John and maybe even join him. I'm sure you all that are parents have had these thoughts, feelings, and fears about the choices that your children might make or have made.

So Jesus comes to John. John baptizes him, and something outrageous happens. Like the spirit hovering over the primordial waters in Genesis 1 and the dove returning to the ark with hope for Noah, the spirit descends on Jesus from heaven as he comes up from the water. John cannot believe it. Did he really hear something? He thought that he heard, "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Who had said it? John didn't see anyone, and Jesus did not seem to know where it had come from. Was his cousin really the one that they had waited for? Jesus, the craftsman from Nazareth. Had he really seen and heard what he thought he had seen and heard? John wasn't sure. Jesus walked up out of the water, through the crowd, and John lost sight of him.

John did not hear about Jesus till much later when he was in prison. John heard that Jesus had started preaching in Galilee that the people should repent. The Kingdom of God was near. What had happened to his cousin? We know from Mark's narrative that just as the people of Israel had spent 40 years in the wilderness after going through the river Jordan, Jesus spent 40 days being tempted in the wilderness after being baptized in the river Jordan. Then Jesus returns to Galilee, the region that surrounds Nazareth, teaching and preaching what he believes is happening in and around him. The Kingdom of God is here, at hand. And the story of Jesus's ministry is just beginning. We know that far more is going to happen in the next three years of Jesus's ministry. We know too that he will return to Judea, to Jerusalem again, but this time not to be baptized in the Jordan River. He will experience a baptism of suffering and death at the hands of the Roman empire and the Jewish authorities. But we won't get to that part of the story until Holy week.

When you think about your own faith journey or your life, when was your beginning? Was it your birth? Was it a later experience when you truly met Jesus for the first time? Or when you were baptized? Or maybe you haven't thought much about beginnings, faith or otherwise. I invite you today if you have not, to spend some time in the coming weeks thinking about your journey and your beginnings and how God may or may not have been a part of it. In the beginning of Mark's gospel, Jesus's beginnings in ministry point to who he is and who he is meant to be. You may not see or realize it now, but as you think and reflect on your journey, you might begin to notice how God has been there just like he was in my life and God was in Jesus and John's beginnings in the first century.

Let's pray! God of beginnings, we thank you that we are each on a journey, that we have not arrived. We pray that you would illuminate for us the ways that you have been working in our lives, especially our beginnings. We pray for your guidance as we continue to walk this journey that we would listen for and discern your will for us. In Jesus's name we pray, and all God's people said, "Amen."

Benediction:

May the grace of Christ that daily renews our lives,
And the love of God that enables us to love all persons,
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit that unites us as one body,
Make us keen to discern and prompt to obey the complete will of God
Until we meet again, through Jesus Christ our Lord.