

January 10, 2021 – Mark 1:4-11 & Romans 6:1-11

To read the Bible is to enter a foreign country. That's the easiest way to describe it, honestly. When we read the Bible we are immersing ourselves in the culture and practices of a foreign country that we just don't always understand. Several foreign countries, in fact. Canaan. Egypt. Israel. Ephesus. Corinth. Rome. And in all different time periods, too. Each with their own set of cultural nuance. It can be overwhelming.

My limited traveling of the world has taught me time and time again that, no matter where I go, there will always be customs I do not understand. It's inevitable. There will always be that moment when I furrow my eyebrows and say, "What are they doing?" That's not an insult or a criticism. Usually there's a very reasonable explanation for the practice. Or, at least, an explanation that's reasonable to them.

There's always something, somewhere, though. And for the most part, we just let these cultural peculiarities run off our back. It's not like we're going to be spending much time there. We can laugh it off and move on easily enough.

And our gut reaction, I think, is to treat these moments in scripture – these moments when we say, "What are they doing?" – just like we do when we see them in real life. We see them, we furrow our eyebrows, and then we shrug our shoulders and move on. Chalk it up to being a foreigner and laugh it off.

There's just one problem with that: We're not foreigners to God's Word. The Bible is where we live. Or at least, it should be. And so brushing aside these moments of confusion really does nothing to make us feel more at home in Scripture. It just continues to make us feel like foreigners.

We see a moment like that in our Gospel lesson for today. In it we read about John the Baptist as he conducted his ministry of baptism and repentance in the Jordan River, waiting for the day when one more powerful than he would come and baptize with the Holy Spirit.

And so Jesus arrives. And He is baptized by John. And as He comes up out of the water, the Holy Spirit descends upon Him like a dove. And Jesus is anointed with the Holy Spirit.

Now, there's a lot to take in here. But I want to start by focusing on one particular word: anointed. Because anointing is one of those cultural customs that I don't think most of us get. It's something completely foreign to us.

Anointing is an ancient, ancient practice, performed ritually and medicinally throughout the history of the world. For the ancient Israelites, it was specified in Scripture to be done with pure olive oil infused with several plants that probably would have made it smell like a combination of cinnamon and cedar. A nice scent to have sitting around.

But this oil was not for sitting around. It was for anointing. For putting on either people or objects and, if it was a person, usually poured on their head. Now, why would anyone want to pour a bunch of olive oil on someone's head? Well, for one, because God said so. But even when God begins the practice of anointing with oil, it seems like something they were familiar with and accustomed to doing.

The reason probably goes back to hygiene, actually. It was commonplace for people of the ancient world to wash themselves with olive oil. They had something similar to soap, made from animal fat and ashes. But it wasn't like the soap we have today. And simply washing with water wouldn't have necessarily gotten the grime off. Your skin is oily. And oil and water don't mix.

But oil and oil do. And good clean olive oil, infused with all sorts of sweet smelling aromas? That would have actually gotten you a lot cleaner and better smelling than water alone would have.

So anointing is a symbol of cleanliness. A symbol of holiness, actually. A symbol that God has cleaned the grime and stench of daily life off this object or person and set them apart for a specific purpose. The very first people in the Bible to be anointed with oil were Aaron and the priests of the Temple. Men set apart to stand before God and make sacrifices for the people.

And the objects that those priests used were anointed too. The Ark of the Covenant, the very embodiment of God's presence with His people, was anointed. The Tabernacle and then Temple where they worked was anointed. The altars on which they made sacrifices were anointed.

But priests weren't the only people anointed in ancient Israel. Kings were as well. They were marked with anointing oil as men chosen by God to lead the nation.

God never specified that the kings of Israel should wear a crown on their heads, although some chose to do so anyway. They didn't need to wear a crown. They wore God's anointing on their heads. And that was better than any piece of metal.

Priests were anointed. Kings were anointed. And prophets were often anointed, too. Anointed with a task to bear God's Word and preach it wherever and whenever God called them. In 1 Kings 19, God commands Elijah to anoint Elisha as his success and as one who would lead the remnant of Israel against the false prophets of Baal. Prophets, priests, and kings, all anointed with oil to mark them as men set apart for a divine task.

That's what it means to be anointed. And so when Jesus arrives at the Jordan River to receive John's baptism and is anointed with the Holy Spirit, this is not just some light and sound show that the Father is putting on for everyone. He is marking Jesus as someone set apart for a special task. He is making Him Jesus the Christ.

Christ literally means 'anointed one.' And it's a title that Jesus really didn't hold before that moment. He was the Son of God, sure. God incarnate, come to earth to be our Savior, absolutely. But being the Christ is a title and a task. A mission and a ministry.

When Jesus came out of the water and the Spirit descended upon Him, He was the same person before and after He went into the water. And yet, He was different. He went into the water as Jesus. And He came out of the water as Jesus the Christ.

And that's important. Because St Paul tells us that our baptism isn't just a baptism with water. We are baptized into Christ. We are baptized into His life, into His death, and into His resurrection.

At the moment we are baptized, a great and blessed exchange happens: our life becomes Jesus' life. Jesus' life becomes our life. Our sins become Jesus' sins, crucified on the cross. Jesus' righteousness becomes our righteousness, covering us in His holiness.

And when we come out of that water, like Jesus, we are anointed as well. Not with the cleansing of oil or perfume. Not with the cleansing of water. Not even with the cleansing of our profession of faith, our own repentance, our own conviction to live a more holy life. Those are all things of this sinful world. And they won't get us clean.

No, instead, as Christ was, we are anointed with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit that washes away the grime of sin and the stench of death. The Spirit that gives us a title and task. A mission and a ministry.

To go into all nations, to all peoples, young and old. (Even to little ones like Lane.) Preaching the Gospel and baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So that just as an adopted child bears the name of the parents who brought him into their home, we bear the name of the Triune God who adopts us into his family and into his kingdom.

We are anointed with the Spirit that gives us a hope that, when our task is finished and death comes near, we have already died to sin and been raised to new life with Christ. And a resurrection just like His awaits us on the last day.

You see, we need to know what it means to be anointed because we follow the anointed one. We are baptized into the anointed one. We are Christians. We are the anointed who follow the anointed one.

The one who is our greatest prophet, our highest priest, our almighty king. The one who is our temple, where we will always find our God. The one who gave his life and lived so that we might lose our lives and live with Him. We follow the Christ. And we find our cleansing in Him. Amen.