

Today we are about to read a story about a blessing. But as I read this story, my question for you to ponder is this: “Who is being blessed in this story? Who is being blessed in this story?”

Read Mark 1: 4-14

Today in the State newspaper there appears an article about Capital City Stadium in Columbia. Capital City Stadium is the old baseball stadium that the city of Columbia is contemplating about whether to sale to build a new Wal-Mart. The best days for Capital City Stadium are behind it. You sit in that stadium now and the seats are uncomfortable compared to the state of the art stadiums that are being built now. There are no luxury boxes.

There is no concourse around the stadium where you can go order a variety of foods from while you still enjoy the entertainment of the game. There are no paved parking lots but just gravel and side streets. No playground equipment for younger children. The area around the stadium does not have trendy restaurants but rather a busy four lane road, a few industrial sites, and an average looking neighborhood. The city of Columbia is looking to sale this stadium and is looking at plans to build a new stadium.

The reason I know that there is an article in the State newspaper is not because I sat down to write this sermon a couple of hours ago. I know that there is an article in the State newspaper today because I was on the State’s website a week or so ago and saw an article in which the editors were asking for people to send them memories of the stadium. And so I sent them a memory that I had and I was contacted that my memory would be included.

And the memory that I shared was this. 2 years ago over the July 4th weekend, I was in Columbia and my Dad invited James and me to attend a game at the old Capital City Stadium. Now I will have to say that I was not excited to attend the particular game that was being played that day. That day the Columbia Blowfish, a summer league wood bat league made up of college players looking to improve their skills were playing the alumni from the USC gamecocks.

And yes, that was right after Carolina had won the first of their two national championships. So the stadium that night was all about celebrating all things USC including an appearance by their coach, Ray Tanner.

Watching a bunch of college players play against a bunch of Carolina baseball alums was not what was important to me that night. For some that may be important, but for me, not so much. But as I sat in that stadium with my father Sam and my son James, I remembered sitting in that same stadium when I was a child with my father. I remembered sitting in that stadium watching the old Sally League Class A Columbia Mets play a game.

And then I remembered my father telling me about how he had sat in that same stadium on Assembly Street with his father to watch the old Columbia Reds play a game. And so for me, sitting in that stadium with my son and with my father became a blessing. For me this blessing was able to take part in an experience with my son that I had shared with my father and that he had shared with his father. A generational blessing.

(Also shared at this point at the blessing of being able to participate in my niece Thama's wedding)

In the story that we read this morning, I asked you to reflect on who you thought was blessed. Was John, the one who did the baptizing, blessed? Or was Jesus, the one who was baptized, the one who was blessed? Or were they both blessed by this event but in a different way?

As was mentioned a few weeks ago, when we begin reading the gospel of Mark we do not begin with stories of Jesus' birth or of who his ancestors were. The gospel of Mark begins with the story of John the Baptist baptizing Jesus in the River Jordan. Now ritual cleansing was not something new with John and Jesus. It was part of the Jewish tradition to go through a ritual cleansing. In fact, when I was in Israel a few years ago I got to see ruins of a Jewish community that had a small building where people would go through a process of ritual cleansing.

If one came into contact with anything that was considered ritually unclean then one underwent a process of ritual cleansing. For Christians, though, this process of baptism has come to mean an outward sign of an inward reality of God cleansing us of sin and anything that separates us from God.

At the baptism of Jesus, something very powerful and magical happens. As Jesus is coming up out of the water, he sees the heavens tear apart and the Spirit descends like a dove upon Jesus. And a voice from heaven announces, "You are

my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.” At this baptism something very clear is announced. At this baptism, Jesus is blessed as God’s son.

But Jesus is not the only one who is blessed at his baptism. At our baptism, we are all blessed. At our baptism we are all blessed because we are welcomed into a family which is much bigger than us. We are welcomed into the family of God by people who come before us and we are welcomed into the family by people who come after us. Being baptized is a sign that you are blessed by God. Baptism reminds us that we are blessed by God.

The reporter asked me what I thought about the old Columbia City Stadium being torn down. I said I had no opinion about that. The city will do whatever its leaders deem they need to do. None of us can live in the past. But as I was talking to the reporter on Friday afternoon it became real to me that I don’t have to be at that stadium to experience that blessing. Just telling that story again about being in that stadium became a blessing for me once again.

The act of baptism, unfortunately, has become one way that Christians divide ourselves. Some of us Christians believe that baptism must only be done when a person is determined to be of an age when they profess their faith in Christ. Some of us Christians believe that for baptism to be real it has to be done where someone is completely submerged. Some of us Christians believe that baptism can be administered to infants and it doesn’t matter how much water is used.

Christians fight over whether or not someone who is not baptized will spend eternity in hell. That’s a shame. For no matter how or when or even if baptism is administered, above all it is a sign of God’s blessing. It is a sign that you are blessed.

But for Jesus, this blessing of baptism was not a blessing into an easy life. Immediately after his baptism, we read that Jesus is driven out into the wilderness. He is in the wilderness for 40 days where he is tempted by Satan and where he lives with the wild beasts. John is then arrested and Jesus calls his followers to repent and believe in the good news.

Our baptism is a blessing but it is also a calling out. A calling out into the world where life is not easy but where we enter with a blessing from God. A calling out to serve God. Even when serving God is difficult.

Today during the prayers of the people I am going to ask for anyone willing to share a time when they were blessed or they blessed the lives of others. It is important to share our blessings.

My experience is that in the retelling of these times of blessing, we are blessed again.

May the memories of God's blessings continue to be upon you. AMEN.

-Given: January 8, 2012 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)