

# The Defining Moment

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January 11, 2015

## **Mark 1:4-11**

On December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, an African-American seamstress in her early forties by the name of Rosa Parks made a decision. She did something she was not supposed to do, perhaps even surprised herself when she did it. She sat down in the front of a bus in one of the seats reserved for whites and then, when the bus became crowded and she was ordered to move to the back of the bus – the colored section – she refused. It was a dangerous, daring and provocative act in a racist society.

Of course, legend has it that years later when she was asked why she sat down at the front of the bus and refused to move when told to, Rosa Parks did not say that she sat down to launch a movement or change a society. No, her motive was much more basic than that. She said, “I sat down because I was tired... my feet hurt.” Now she had studied the theory and tactics of non-violence. And she was the secretary of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP, where there has been much talk of peaceful civil disobedience. But, in the words of educator and writer, Parker Palmer, “In the moment she sat down at the front of the bus on that December day, she had no guarantee that the theory of non-violence would work or that her community would back her up. It was a moment of existential truth, of claiming authentic selfhood, of reclaiming her birthright... Rosa Parks sat down because she had reached a point where it was essential to embrace her true vocation, not as someone who would reshape society, but as someone who would live out her full self in the world. She decided, ‘I will no longer act on the outside in a way that contradicts the truth I hold deeply on the inside. I will no longer act as if I were less than the whole person I know myself inwardly to be.’ In refusing to conspire any longer with a racist system, she named and claimed her true self.” Now that’s what I would call a defining moment...a baptismal moment.

Her momentous decision reminds me of these classic words from the former Secretary General of the United Nations and great man of the spirit, the late Dag Hammarskjold: “I don’t know Who – or what – put the question. I don’t know when it was put. I don’t even remember answering. But at some point I did answer ‘Yes’ to Someone – or Something – and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.” He also said this: “It is not we who seek the Way, but the Way which seeks us. That is why you are faithful to it, even while you stand waiting, so long as you are prepared and act the moment you are confronted by its demands.” Rosa Parks had said, “Yes,” and when the moment arrived she was prepared to act – to meet the demands of the Way which had chosen her. And not just her.

“In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased.’” The church has often struggled with the whole idea of Jesus’ baptism. After all, if baptism is about repentance and forgiveness of sins, then why would Jesus – the sinless one – possibly need to be baptized? Or could his moment in the Jordan River have been Jesus’ Rosa Parks moment, his defining moment; the moment when he dared to claim his true self, to say “Yes” with clarity and courage, to accept the demands and challenges of the Way he must follow and never look back. In the words of Parker Palmer, “Rosa Parks took her stand with clarity and courage. Some journeys are direct and some are circuitous; some are heroic and some are fearful and muddled. But every journey, honestly undertaken, stand a chance of taking us toward the place where our deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.” Not a bad description of what I believe happened to Jesus that afternoon in the river. But does it speak to us? Had any defining moments lately? I know I would love for my deep gladness to meet the world’s deep need, but I fear I spend a lot of my life completely clueless about what my deep gladness might actually be? Somehow I suspect it is deeper than fly fishing or the outcome of a certain NFL playoff game.

I once heard a church member say this: “On Sunday morning I walk into church and find a world that looks pretty much the way God meant it to be. People are considerate of one another. Strangers are welcomed. We pray for each other; we pray for justice and peace in the world as we worship God. When it’s all over, I get in my car to drive home feeling so full of love and hope. But by the time I’ve gone twenty minutes down the road, it has already begun to wear off. By Monday morning it’s all gone, and I’ve got another whole week to wait until Sunday rolls around again.”

He had a point. I once read that in the moment Jesus is baptized, the barrier between heaven and earth is removed. No longer is God some distant, impervious ruler sitting on a throne high above the struggle. God has now come to dwell with us, to join us in taking the full, undiluted dose of our humanity. God is now on the loose in our world, swooping into the world like a dove. The heavens have been “torn apart”. But, as the church member observed, it is so easy to forget that. The world has a way of wringing us out, shaping us in its image, imposing upon us its priorities and standards. We forget that God dwells in and among us, we forget our precious identity as God’s beloved, we get out of touch with that inward place of deep gladness.

I want to return again to one of my favorite scenes from Alex Haley’s *Roots*. Do you recall the night the slave, Kunta Kinte, drives his master to a ball at a big plantation house? He parks the buggy and settles down to wait out the night, listening to the music coming from the house. But then he hears other music, distinct music. It is coming from the slaves’ quarters located behind the big house. It is music with a different rhythm, but vaguely familiar. His legs seem to have a mind of their own as they carry him down the path toward those cabins - toward the music. He finds a man playing African music, the music of Kunta Kinte’s childhood, music he had almost forgotten. He discovers that the man is from his home area of Africa. They talk excitedly in their native language; they talk of home and the things of home.

That night, back in his cabin, Kunta Kinte is a changed man. He lies on the floor and weeps; he weeps in sadness that he had almost forgotten; he weeps in joy that he has at last remembered. The terrifying, degrading, humiliating experience of slavery had almost obliterated his memory, which is precisely what it was designed to do. But the music, the music, had enabled him to remember... to remember who he truly was, and for a moment, even in that terrible place, opened him to his deepest gladness. That story is a parable of baptism

I cannot stand here today and define for you what your deepest gladness might be or when you might discover it. Nor can I predict for you when or what your defining moment might be. It might have already happened; there might be more to come. Sometimes it is obvious and sometimes it is not. Sometimes the call of God, the work of God’s hand, the defining moment is so evident that you can see it a mile away, and sometimes you have to dust for fingerprints. Sometimes the voice seems to come straight from heaven and sometimes it comes through the voices of strangers and friends. I really cannot say what it will be for you.

But I can say this: “Remember your baptism and be thankful.” Remember: remember like Kunta Kinte, remember like Rosa Parks, remember like Jesus of Nazareth. Remember that you are made, loved and claimed by God as God’s beloved child. May the touch of water upon your lives enable you to remember that God’s creative force is still birthing us, renewing us, empowering us. Remember the God who creates whole worlds out of total chaos, who breathes life into piles of dust, who takes the unfathomable wreckage of our lives and makes something fine out of them, often in spite of ourselves. Remember that the heavens have been torn open. Something new has emerged; a mystery once hidden has been revealed; a presence once absent is now among us. Remember that God speaks to each and every one of us, if only we are listening. And God says this: “You are my son... You are my daughter. So live and act as if you are. Prepare yourselves to be part of my family, to take your place in my Kingdom of justice and hope and peace.” Yes. Remember...and when the time comes, as it surely will, you will be ready.