

Standing in the Gap

Mark 1:4-11

In 2004, Susan and I led a tour with Educational Opportunities Tours to England and Scotland. One of the first things we noticed in London were signs that read MIND THE GAP. We didn't have a clue what they meant and so we asked. They refer primarily to the gap between the platform and train. When getting on and getting off, mind the gap. Be careful. Watch your step. But it went beyond that. When riding a bus, mind the gap. Watch that first step. Whenever I see a good friend of mine who traveled with us to England, we say to each other, "Mind the gap." For me, mind the gap has become a watchword in daily life. Be aware of your surroundings. Pay attention.

There are, of course, many different kinds of gaps, and minding them is important. When I coached youth soccer many years ago, I would assess the talent on my team at the beginning of the season. I always took the most gifted athlete and placed him or her at center halfback. That position requires quick thinking and reactions, and a lot of running. At times the center halfback would need to move forward into the gap and help out the strikers on offense. Then, just as quickly, the center halfback would be required to shift directions and drop back into the gap with the fullbacks and assist on defense. As an aside, I always chose the most fearless player on the team to be the goalie. Talk about minding the gap. It's not a position for the faint of heart.

Throughout life, to mind the gap very often requires us to stand in it and deal with it. I would offer that the entirety of our life is one large gap. There is a gap between our birth and our death. Jesus chose to stand in that gap. For him not to stand there is for God to leave us to our own devices in trying to save our lives. It is the Christ who connects our birth and death together. It is the Christ who gives our lives meaning and purpose.

I want you to look at the cross behind me. Think of the horizontal piece as representing our life with birth on one end and death on the other. Now picture Christ outstretched on the cross, his hands nailed to the ends. It symbolizes Christ holding us with one hand at the onset of our life, then continuing to stand in the gap throughout the entirety of our lives, and he is still holding on to us at the moment of death with his other hand. The vertical piece is longer than the horizontal piece. It represents God stretching from heaven at the top to earth at the bottom. It also represents eternity. On the one hand, the vertical piece is longer because God is ever so much greater than are we, and on the other hand it reminds us that our life is short compared with the time and space of eternity.

John the Baptist stood in the gap between the Hebrew people and their sinfulness of ignoring God and breaking his commandments. John stood in the waters of the Jordan, crying out to the people to come back to God and be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins. Suddenly, Jesus approached, waded in, and submitted to John's baptism. It marked the beginning of his ministry and his journey to the cross.

A great deal of theological commentary has been written about why Jesus submitted to baptism by John. Jesus was, of course, without sin. Thus, logically speaking, there wasn't any reason for him to be baptized. This is the reason – standing in the gap! Jesus' baptism signaled his intention to step forward into the gap of all our lives. By his baptism he is saying to each of us, "You can't do this alone. I am here. I will hold onto you. Walk with me and trust me. With me standing in the gap by your side, you can and will endure."

Our own baptism symbolizes two things. First, it is our acceptance of Jesus standing in the gap of life with us, trusting him to guide us in our daily life, and into salvation. We baptize our children because it is the parent's and church's way of acknowledging that Christ is standing in the gap of the child's life. We vow to also stand with Christ in the gap of our children's lives. Second, our baptism signals our intention to accept the mantle of Christ and stand in the gap for others.

Where do you see gaps around you? With your spouse, another loved one, a good friend? Are you hanging back, reluctant to get involved, hoping things will get better for them? Or, can you remember the meaning of your baptism with its claim and call on your life, and step forward to stand with the person in their gap? Can you move up, hold out your hand to another person as Christ has held out his hand to you, take that person's hand and say to them, "I am here. I will help you."

There are gaps everywhere. The poor and minorities are living in a huge gap. So also are the hungry and homeless. Who stands with them if not the people of God, who have been baptized in the Lord? To stand in the gap with another person who is struggling is to take a risk. It is to step out of our own comfort zone and become vulnerable. Jesus made himself vulnerable to save us from our sins, to the point of death on the cross. He stands in our gap. Surely we can resolve for the New Year to have the courage to move into the gaps of other people and stand there with the assurance that Christ also stands there with us and for them! May we live our lives standing in the gap – and minding the gap! Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 8 January 2012
[Baptism of the Lord]