

Epiphany 1 / B – Baptism of Our Lord

*Beginnings*

Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29;

Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

10 January 2021

Each of the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – each begins in their own unique manner. Matthew, for example, embarks from the very first verse on a lengthy

genealogy of Jesus, tracing his Jewish lineage all the way back to Abraham. Luke, by contrast, begins with an introduction that reads like part memoir and part history textbook. John, for his part, utilizes poetry to introduce theological themes that continue throughout his Gospel.

But Mark is in a category all by himself. He never offers a genealogy of Jesus at all, offers no nativity story, never claims to be writing history, and moves the narrative along at such speed that there is little time for theology - and certainly no time for poetry. Instead, Mark jumps right into the fray and opens on the banks of the river Jordan, as the adult Jesus is baptized by his cousin, John the Baptist.

Given that today is the first Sunday after the Epiphany, and thus the first Sunday since November that our churches are not adorned with Advent wreaths and Christmas crèches, this is also the de facto beginning of our yearlong Sunday reading of the Gospel of Mark. And although the action in Mark's tale begins in the fourth verse of the first chapter, it bears pointing out that the first three introductory verses lend important clues about just what kind of Gospel Mark is writing, and how readers ancient and modern should absorb and take it in.

For starters, it is no accident that Mark's Gospel doesn't make it past the first two sentences without quoting the Hebrew scriptures - in particular, the great prophet Isaiah. Mark, not unlike Jesus himself, knew the Jewish



scriptures well and quoted them often. He narrates the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, not as a new story about God and God's people, but rather as a pivotal moment in the larger, ongoing, eternal story of God making God's-self known in human history. The God we meet in Jesus, Mark tells us, is the very same God spoken of in the Hebrew scriptures, the God of Abraham and Moses, the very same God who was and is doing – from the very first act of Creation, down to the present moment – doing, always acting, always creating a new thing.

The second thing these first three introductory verses point out is that this Gospel that Mark has written – literally, this “good news” – is not all that can or should be said of Jesus of Nazareth. Rather, Mark makes clear from the first words of his Gospel that this is, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

Mark makes these two important points just prior to launching into the story of baptism because he wants us to know and understand that baptism works in much the same way. In baptism, we don't stop being who we are, nor do we get to ignore our past and the history that inevitably and fundamentally shapes us, and has brought us to this place and this day. Just as Jesus doesn't ever stop being Mary's boy from Bethlehem, incarnate from the God we first meet in the opening words of Genesis, so too are we all someone from somewhere - for better or worse.

When we come to the waters of baptism, we bring all of that with us - all of our humanity; all of the ways in which our families of origin and experiences have made us who we are - the good, the bad, and the ugly!

In other words, our human identities can't be ignored or reinvented by our baptism, nor can they be centered purely in introspection and individualism after emerging from the baptismal waters. Baptism changes our direction, but does not erase the path we have traveled. Our identities are and must remain deeply rooted in our families, in our communities, and in the contexts that form and shape us. In order to know ourselves, we must know each other.

And in the same way that Mark's Gospel is the beginning rather than the sum total of all that can be said of Jesus, so too baptism isn't a sacramental participation trophy to be displayed in a lighted and locked

cabinet. Baptism is but the beginning of our life in covenantal relationship with the living God, made known to us in Jesus Christ.

The baptized life is not a career that we can pursue part-time, or one day retire from. It is a life-long vocation meant to be lived out with every fiber of our being. That's why it's so important that we renew our baptismal vows over and over again, and share in the feast of Christ's body and blood over and over again, and read and study Scripture over and over again - because we human beings are forgetful people!

An essential part of the Christian vocation is reminding ourselves and one another just who and whose we are. We do that by extending and receiving love and grace and mercy, by opening ourselves up to vulnerability, and ultimately by telling the story of the God we meet in Jesus - a story that we enter into, a story that continues to the fullness of time, continues to the end of time, bearing us along with it.

Mark's Gospel, the shortest of the four Gospels, is also the fastest moving, proceeding at breakneck speed. In fact, the word "immediately" appears 42 times in Mark's text - three times more often than in all the rest of the New Testament, and seven times more often than in the entire Old Testament. And Mark's style of writing is a sermon and life-lesson in itself: Mark would have us know that, just as the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection moves at a breakneck pace, so too does the life of the baptized! The work of God's Kingdom is urgent! There is no time to waste! It must be done – and done immediately!

That's why, when Jesus is baptized, Mark wants us to feel the water, and smell the breeze, and see the spectacle! That's why, when he describes the heavens opening, he says they were torn apart – "schizomenous" is the word in Greek. "Schizomenous": it shares the same root as the word "schizophrenia". And it means a visceral and violent disruption in the status quo. In Mark's account of Jesus' baptism, it is nothing less than God's own voice that disrupts the status quo, declaring Jesus to be God's own Beloved, God's own Son!

In describing Jesus' baptism ... In beginning his Gospel with this event ... Mark would have us consider and contemplate our own baptism, our own beginning as a child of God ...

If we want everything in life to remain exactly as it is, and if we want to stay exactly where we are, remain exactly who we are, doing exactly what we're doing, without any change in direction, perhaps we should re-think baptism and our pursuit of the Christian life.

But if, on the other hand, we desire a life dedicated to following the living God, as we work together to build God's kingdom in this world, then the place to start is where Mark begins - at the very edge of the baptismal waters.

From there, find a good pair of shoes and a sturdy walking stick - because the journey has just begun, and the work of the Kingdom is far too urgent to wait. So, come along, Mark urges! Come! Follow Christ! Immediately!

Amen.