

*Baptism of our Lord*

January 7, 2017

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Mark. (Mark 1: 4-11)

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

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 Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

When I was growing up, we lived one block from my grandparents. Needless to say, we were at my grandparents' house a lot. My grandmother was outgoing and warm. She loved to cook. She loved to gossip. She knew everything about everybody on the block. My grandfather, on the other hand, was a very private man. The son of German immigrants, he kept to himself. He was definitely not a man of many words.

For example, every Sunday night we would go over to my grandparents for dinner. Grandpa was an avid fisherman, so he was out on the Chesapeake Bay all day Saturday, and we always had fried fish on Sunday for dinner. Grandmom would set it all out, and we would sit around the table, and we would talk about school or work, and we would hear about everybody in the neighborhood and what was going on. And my grandfather would sit there, and he would eat, and never say a word. And then, when he finished, he would get up and he would go in the other room. And we would just keep talking, and he would leave.

The writer of the Gospel of Mark is a lot like my grandpa. He is a man of few words. This is the year of Mark. We're going to spend most of the year reading out of the Gospel of Mark. So here at the beginning, it's good to get to know Mark a little bit.

Mark wrote the shortest gospel. People hurried through this gospel. His favorite word is “immediately.” Immediately they went there. Immediately they did that. He is not a man of many words. Mark doesn’t give us a lot of detail. Mark is pretty plain spoken. And he doesn’t make things fancy or clean them up. For example, in the eighth chapter, Jesus heals a blind man, and it doesn’t work. And he has to do it again to get it right. Really. Look it up.

And then there is the resurrection story in Mark’s Gospel. We don’t usually read Mark’s Gospel on Easter Sunday, and it’s because, as the story goes, the women go to the tomb, and they see an angel. And the angel says, “Jesus has risen,” and they celebrate and they go home and they don’t tell anybody. The end. That’s Mark’s Gospel. It’s fast; it’s short. And he doesn’t use a lot of words.

So today, as we hear the beginning of this Gospel, we find ourselves already at the river. Mark gets right down to it. He doesn’t have birth stories. He doesn’t have this wonderful poetic opening, talking about the incarnation, like John does. Nope. He just starts right in. “*This is the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ,*” he says. And then he goes to the river. And one has to wonder, how did we get here? Where are we in the river? The river Jordan flows from near Syria all the way to the Dead Sea. Where are we? Was the river running high that day? Or was it still and muddy? Who else was there around them besides John? Was it a sunny day? Was it a rainy day? What’s going on here?

Mark doesn’t tell us much. He just says, “*Jesus came and was baptized by John in the Jordan.*” He doesn’t say, “Jesus stood in line for three hours so he could get baptized.” He doesn’t say, “He stepped up and greeted John.” There is no conversation. There is no question. Does Jesus hesitate before he went under the water? Did he hold his breath? Did he say a quiet prayer? Did he look up at the sky? Mark doesn’t say. Which is why it is so compelling when Mark describes what comes next.

Mark writes,

*“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.”*

The heavens are torn, ripped, ruptured. The word in Greek is “skidzo,” like schism, or schizophrenic; a tearing open, a splitting. This is not the opening of a door. This is not the clean cutting of a scalpel. This is ripping.

Have you ever torn your jeans? Have you ever caught your coat on a nail and ripped it? Have you ever ripped your panty hose? I know that’s not true for some of you. But, for others of us, it happens a lot.

A tear can't go back to what it was before. It might get patched. You might be able to hide it. But it can't go back to what it was.

The heavens are torn open. That which separates God and mortals is forever torn. Reality is changed. We can't go back.

Torn. We know about torn places, don't we? Looking back over the past year, we can see a lot of torn places. There are tears in the fabric of society; tears in our trust for each other. Many are discovering tears in their self-image as privileged people. Some have had relationships ripped open, or healthy bodies ruptured.

We know about torn places. Reality changes, and it's not going back the way it was. "*The heavens are torn.*" But God comes through the torn places.

When the heavens are torn, the Spirit descends. Mark says, "*descends like a dove.*" He doesn't tell us if it's like a harpy, dive-bombing dove, or if it's a gentle floating bird dove. But we know that the Spirit comes through the torn place. God comes through the torn place. And then there is a voice. Literally, the Greek says, "a voice was."

Thanks, Mark. We don't know if only Jesus heard the voice. We don't know if it was a loud and booming voice, like you hear in the movies. Richard Swanson suggests the voice Jesus heard was the "bat qol," the daughter of a sound, the echo by which God speaks in a world that cannot hear God's true voice. Only the daughter of a sound.

Mark lets us imagine that voice, speaking in ways that perhaps we have heard God speak in the past, that impression, that idea, that opportunity, that person that entered my life, that still, small voice, that daughter of a sound, that we know. We know because we've heard it.

Mark writes, "*And a voice was from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'*" You are the beloved. In you I take delight. We are now eleven verses into the Gospel of Mark. The beginning. Before Jesus enters the wilderness and is tempted, before he calls disciples and starts ministry, before he faces the cross and betrayal and death, Jesus is called "beloved." At the beginning he is beloved, and so are we.

In baptism, we are sealed by the Spirit, marked with the cross, and given the name "beloved." Before we learn to pray, before we discover our gifts and talents, before we walk the winding road of discipleship, we are named "beloved."

We are named beloved, and we become part of a people called beloved. We enter that wonderfully diverse, expansive, worldwide group of people who know that a voice has called them beloved. The group of people who know that in all the torn places in our lives, and all the torn places in this world, the Spirit still comes, comes to the torn places, and whispers, "beloved."

We are a people named “beloved.” And a people who go out ourselves into torn places, and dying places, and places of longing, and places where creation is ripped open. We go to the places of hunger, and disappointment, and loneliness, and fractured lives. And we whisper that word that we have heard: “beloved.” With our words and our touch and our work, we whisper “beloved.” You are beloved. To torn lives and torn people and torn creation, we whisper, “Beloved.”

In the name of Christ, we will keep whispering “beloved,” until others can hear it and find the voice to whisper “beloved,” too.

This is the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are eleven verses into the Gospel of Mark. Mark is not a man of many words. But so far he has given us a God who comes and a God who loves us into the future.

I think, for today, that is enough.

Amen.