

Sunday, January 10, 2021

Baptism of Our Lord, Year B

Introduction

Our re-creation in baptism is an image of the Genesis creation, where the Spirit of God moved over the waters. Both Mark's gospel and the story in Acts make clear that it is the Spirit's movement that distinguishes Jesus' baptism from John's. The Spirit has come upon us as upon Jesus and the Ephesians, calling us God's beloved children and setting us on Jesus' mission to re-create the world in the image of God's vision of justice and peace.

Prayer of the Day

Holy God, creator of light and giver of goodness, your voice moves over the waters. Immerse us in your grace, and transform us by your Spirit, that we may follow after your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

Genesis 1:1-5

Out of chaos, God brings order. Out of the formless void, God brings light. This familiar story was good news for the Israelites, who experienced much chaos in their history. It remains good news for us. God created and continues to create new life.

¹In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Psalm 29

The voice of the LORD is upon the waters. (Ps. 29:3)

¹Ascribe to the | LORD, you gods,
ascribe to the LORD glo- | ry and strength.

²**Ascribe to the LORD the glory | due God's name;
worship the LORD in the beau- | ty of holiness.**

³The voice of the LORD is upon the waters; the God of | glory thunders;
the LORD is upon the | mighty waters.

⁴**The voice of the LORD is a pow- | erful voice;
the voice of the LORD is a | voice of splendour.**

R/ *The voice of the LORD is upon the waters.*

⁵The voice of the LORD breaks the | cedar trees;
the LORD breaks the ce- | dars of Lebanon;

⁶**the LORD makes Lebanon skip | like a calf,
and Mount Hermon like a | young wild ox.**

⁷The voice | of the LORD
bursts forth in | lightning flashes.

⁸**The voice of the LORD | shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilder- | ness of Kadesh.**

R/ *The voice of the LORD is upon the waters.*

⁹The voice of the LORD makes the oak trees writhe and strips the | forests bare.
And in the temple of the LORD all are | crying, "Glory!"

¹⁰**The LORD sits enthroned a- | bove the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as king for- | evermore.**

¹¹O LORD, give strength | to your people;
give them, O LORD, the bless- | ings of peace.

R/ *The voice of the LORD is upon the waters.*

Mark 1:4-11

Mark's gospel reports the story of Jesus' baptism with some irony: the one on whom the Spirit descends is himself the one who will baptise others with the Holy Spirit.

⁴John the baptiser appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And 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. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He 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. ⁸I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit."

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Sermon

Heaven Opened

At his Baptism Mark reports that Jesus saw the heavens opened, as a way to say that he was going to serve as a bridge God and humanity

I'll get to the significance of our Baptisms in a few minutes, but first a few things that distinguish the Baptism of our Lord.

Mark's account of the event we celebrate today is the oldest in Scripture.

Paul's letters are a decade or two earlier, but do not focus on this event.

The other Gospels which report and expand the narrative come later.

So...

according to Mark
the story of the Gospel begins with the preaching of John,
baptisms in the Jordan,
and the arrival of a grown-up Jesus.

No census,
stable,
or shepherds.

Or wisemen
and their symbolic gifts.

In those days –
meaning during the days of John's prophetic preaching and baptising –
Jesus (which is the first mention of his name in this account)
comes from Nazareth.

Which is to say
that as Mark envisioned him
Jesus was probably a child of the ancient northern kingdom of Israel.

Seven centuries earlier Assyria had laid claim to the region
after taking control of the city of Samaria.

Many of the Hebrews or Israelites,
descended from the twelve sons or tribes of Jacob,
were taken to other parts of the Assyrian empire.

And foreigners from other parts of the empire
were settled in their homes or farms in Galilee.

So that as Jesus travels from one place to another
during the first half of his ministry,
he goes from what the writer calls Jewish and gentile communities.
Deliberately.

From the beginning Jesus,
is an outsider as far as Hebrews from Judea
and their leaders in Jerusalem were concerned.

That John baptises him
either means that he did not know that he was from Nazareth,
or that he believed it didn't matter to God.

Based on what Luke and Matthew write
we have turned Jesus
into a proper Jew,
but Samaritan, half-breed or dog
are the better terms according to this note Mark.

And it is this foreigner or outsider
whom God has chosen.

Jesus leaves his home
and goes perhaps 100 kilometers
to the Jordan river,
at a site to the east of Jerusalem,
from the wrong bank;
the wilderness side.

And as he steps out of the water
Mark says that Jesus saw the heaven's ripped wide open,
torn apart.

He uses a violent word.

To say that on this occasion
the barrier between heaven and earth
is breached;
that Jesus is going to connect these two distinct realms.
Like an emissary.
Or a bridge.

Jesus also sees the Holy Spirit,
coming to him like a dove.

(Presumably in a way that others did not experience
or notice.)

Even before readers of this event
knew much about what we call the third person of the Trinity.

Here the Spirit is wind,
God's breath.

Accompanying the message that Jesus alone seems to hear;

You are my Son,
the Beloved;

with you I am well-pleased.

Apart from centuries of doctrine,
and relying solely on this text,
we might be tempted to hear *a son,*
much loved,
receiving an important endorsement.

Even before we have heard about a single thing Jesus has said or done.

God's being pleased with him seems here
to have nothing to do with Jesus' thoughts,
or teachings
or achievements.

It is simply a clue
about grace.

In this Gospel story
the Baptism is meant to set Jesus apart and alone;

a sign he receives from God
to launch his ministry,
which he repeatedly asks his followers to keep secret
until his death and rising.

It is a private and personal encouragement,
which, as we'll see in Lent,
propels him to face his Temptations.

It is the start of something big.

Which now brings us to our Baptisms.

At a variety of fonts
we have become God's sons and daughters,
though perhaps in a different sense than Jesus.

Some of us may have come from more respectable families than others.

Some of us may have never,
in our lives,
felt like outsiders or strangers.

Some few of us may even imagine that before God adopted us
our thoughts and feelings, words and deed pleased the Almighty.

But in truth we are more like the Jesus introduced to us by Mark.

From God's perspective we all approach from the wrong side of the Jordan.

We are all aliens to God's kingdom of light.

We do not deserve what is granted
as a pure,
a new identity.

We have these things in common with the portrait of Jesus presented by Mark.

What distinguishes us, I believe,
is that Jesus leads
and we follow.

His Sonship makes our adoption possible.

His trust in God establishes and nourishes our faith.

His mission saves the whole of humanity,
while we are called and equipped to love and care for those
in our small corners of the world.

So let's see what this wet man has for us,
and where he alone leads.

Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

P Guided by Christ made known to the nations, let us offer our prayers for the church, the world, and all people in need.

A brief silence.

A For wilderness and water, wind and wild beasts, and all living things on earth, that God's goodness is revealed through creation and faithful stewards care for all God has made, let us pray.

C Have mercy, O God.

A For the church throughout the world and its leaders, including Chinese Lutheran, that guided by the Holy Spirit they proclaim the forgiveness of sins, let us pray.

C Have mercy, O God.

A For the nations of the world and their leaders, for labourers busy both day and night, and for peacemakers amid strife, that God inspire all people to use their strength wisely, let us pray.

C Have mercy, O God.

A For the sick and those who provide medical care, for the imprisoned and those who show them mercy, for the lonely and those who provide companionship, for all who suffer (*especially*), that God shower them with compassion, let us pray.

C Have mercy, O God.

A For the congregation gathered here, for students returning to school, for those seeking renewal in their daily work, that all the beloved of God experience grace and peace, let us pray.

C Have mercy, O God.

Here other intercessions may be offered.

A In thanksgiving for the faithful departed who now rest from their labors, that their witness inspire us in our baptismal vocations, let us pray.

C Have mercy, O God.

P Merciful God, hear the prayers of your people, spoken or silent, for the sake of the one who dwells among us, your Son, Jesus Christ our Saviour.

C Amen.

Offering Prayer

A O God,
receive these gifts as you receive us:
like a mother receives her child, with arms open wide.
Nourish us anew in your tender care,
and empower us in faithful service
to tend to others with this same love,
through Jesus Christ, our saving grace.

C Amen.

Blessing

P God the creator strengthen you;
Jesus the beloved fill you;
and the Holy Spirit the comforter ✝ keep you in peace.

C Amen.

Dismissal

A Go in peace. Be the light of Christ.

C Thanks be to God.

Upcoming Commemorations

Martin Luther King Jr., renewer of society, martyr, died 1968

Friday, January 15, 2021

An American prophet of justice among races and nations, King was an eloquent preacher, a leader of the nonviolent resistance to race-segregated society, and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. Born on this date, he was assassinated on April 4, 1968.