

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Baptism of Our Lord - Year B

Genesis 1:1-5

Psalm 29

Acts 19:1-7

Mark 1:4-11

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark

4John the baptizer 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 baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

9In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized 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."

The Gospel of our Lord

Prayer

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

Ripped Open

Good morning! In the spring of my first semester at Southern Seminary, we were assigned this text for our very first sermon in our preaching class. Let's cross our fingers that this one goes better than my first sermon. Our Gospel lesson ends with verse 11, I included verses 12-13 in my final sermon and to make a long story short... the professor felt that I called her Satan by the end of my sermon... But that's a story for another day.

Moving on though! Does the text sound familiar? It should, we heard verses 4-8 in the second Sunday of Advent. It was really strange to me how much of a difference 3 verses can make. In my Advent sermon the focus was John's call to repentance and the role that the wilderness played in Jewish and Christian thought. But now, just a few verses later, the focus has shifted to Jesus. And why shouldn't it? He's the main event. With just three verses the Gospel writer of Mark has done a fantastic job of showing us where the real attention should be.

It's Jesus! We have here the prologue to the rest of the Gospel. The first 13 verses of the Gospel of Mark are the writer's introduction to the changes that God is enacting in the world. If it feels a little fast paced, that's because it is! One of the hallmarks of the Gospel of Mark is that the writer is in a hurry. Everything happens immediately, or suddenly. The writer has us rushing towards Jerusalem and the cross, and the beginning of the story is no different. It's one thing

right after another, from ancient prophecy, to John the Baptist, to Jesus, to the wilderness and ultimately the beginning of Jesus' earthly mission.

The ministry of Jesus begins with John the Baptist making references to Old Testament prophecy, and scholars have struggled to specifically identify what those passages mean in light of Jesus' ministry, but it remains challenging.¹ I think this is because it's pretty challenging to try and put God into a nice and neat box. Thomas Aquinas, the famous 13th century theologian of the church wrote books upon books about God and towards the end of his life commented that "everything he had written was straw." We could spend our entire lives trying to explain the magnitude of God and at the end of our life we would have barely scratched the surface.

What are some of the ways or times that you have struggled to understand God, or a time when God completely astounded you? Spend a few minutes discussing with your neighbor.

God astounds us all the time... but transitioning back to the text, one little detail has always fascinated Christians... why be baptized? And why does it matter? As I mentioned in my sermon on John the Baptist, we're pretty sure that Jesus was baptized by John, but from there the discussion rages. In fact, Dr. Lamar Williamson Jr. begins his commentary on this section of Mark with that very question. "*Why does baptism matter?*"² For him, part of the answer lies in the church season in which this text come up, Epiphany. The season of Epiphany, if it could be called that, basically begins and ends today, with the baptism of Jesus. The word epiphany means

¹Williamson, Lamar. *Mark*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. pp. 35

²Williamson, Lamar. *Mark*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. pp. 33

manifestation³ as in a manifestation of God. It can also mean a moment of understanding or clarity. So what we have before us today, is the story of God's epiphany, of Jesus' ministry beginning... So let's take a closer look at these three verses.

Mark is my second favorite Gospel, and it's little things like this baptism that make it so interesting and fun. In the three verses about the baptism of Jesus we are given access to parts of the story that those present are not aware of. The heavens opening up, the Holy Spirit descending like a dove, and the words from heaven are all things that only the reader and Jesus are able to see.

To make things even more interesting we should take a look at verse 10. The NRSV does a pretty good job, translating it as "the heavens torn apart." The old RSV said "the heavens opened" and in another bad translation they say "heavens opening," too. They sound like the Gospel of Matthew, where things are all cleaned up. But the word that Mark uses here is violent. The Greek word is *schizomenous*⁴ and it means to split or to tear. The word is only used nine times in all of the New Testament, and Mark uses it twice. The first time is here during the baptism. The second is when the temple curtain is split in two during Jesus' crucifixion. One scholar writes that "*in the ancient cosmology the tearing open of the heavens could symbolize the possibility of divine-human communication.*"⁵ And that's why I like Mark. This isn't like the Gospel of Matthew where everything is nice and neat, no, the heavens are ripped open! The

³Williamson, Lamar. *Mark*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. pp. 33

⁴Donahue, John R., and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Gospel of Mark*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2002. pp. 65

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barrier between us and God is torn open in such a way that it can't be repaired! If you heard my sermon on Christmas Eve you might understand where I'm going with this: God comes "down" to earth and changes the all the rules that governed how we understood our relationship to God. Yes, other religions had stories about half-human half-god beings, but never in such a vulnerable way, and never fully human and fully divine! Before Jesus, we could say "God, you just don't understand!" But we can't use that excuse anymore! Our God does understand!

And it all begins here in Mark with the baptism of some guy from Galilee. Dr. Lamar Williamson eventually answers his question about why baptism matters. He writes: "*In Mark the baptism of Jesus establishes his identity... in (the writings of) Paul... the baptism of believers establishes our identity. Jesus is who God says he is. So also we are who God says we are... baptism matter(s)... because we are who God says we are.*"⁶ We are God's.... sounds pretty good to me. Amen.

⁶Williamson, Lamar. *Mark*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. pp. 35-36