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Baptism of Our Lord - Year B
St. Paul's Lutheran Church
Genesis 1:1-5
Psalm 29
Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:4-11
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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.

A Rip in the Fabric of Space and Time!

Good morning! I'm not really sure how it started, probably like any other event between two brothers. But it steadily ramped up until the house my parents were not present in became a battleground between two knights. Any parent who has had two young boys probably knows exactly what I'm talking about. Even though we were teenagers, the lure of a sword fight was too much to pass up. Now, our swords were not, in fact, swords. (At least this time!) I believe that we both were using old broom handles. But the fighting was fierce! At some point as the battle raged from the highest peak to the lowest dungeon, we decided to test our skill against a throwing weapon. Could we block a "spear" throw? After a few successful attempts the "spear" was either thrown too fast, or was blocked with a little too much enthusiasm, because it careened past the fighter and lodged itself directly in the wall. Now, our house was older and so this wasn't just drywall. The "spear" had pushed through the plaster and even broken through the lath, leaving a perfectly round broom handle hole in the wall. Well, needless to say, the fighting stopped as we hastily tried to make a quick patch. But, there is only so much a teenager's patching skills can do, and a white poorly patched hole tends to stick out on a painted wall. "UMM... WHAT HAPPENED TO THE WALL?!", my mother yelled when she got home.

Oddly, I don't think we got in a ton of trouble for that one. But it was clear that damage had been done. Fortunately, this was entirely fixable, unlike some of our other escapades. But in today's Gospel lesson we witness something that changes everything.

We celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord today. It's a strange story, and from a historical perspective seems to bare all the traits of a genuine and

real event. It's reported in all the Gospels, and it makes its first appearance here in the Gospel of Mark, which is the first of the four to be written, most likely sometime around 75CE. Of all the baptism accounts I like the version here in Mark the best. The later stories seem to try and make things a little more pretty, to wrap up everything with a neat little bow. That's not the case here in today's text. The event here is real, it's raw.

I'm sure you all remember, but in years past we have approached this story from a few different angles. But one thing that always seems to confuse us is why in the world would Jesus need to be baptized in the first place? You see, we approach baptism from the perspective of a 21st century reader, which I guess is understandable. But baptism in the 1st century was different. That's why John was doing baptisms in the first place. They were used to mark a significant event or change in someone's relationship with God. And here for Jesus it serves as a sort of coronation. This is Jesus marking the beginning of his ministry. In all of the four Gospels the baptism of Jesus serves as the "beginning" of his earthly ministry. We might have a few stories from before that time, but they serve as a sort of prequel to the main story that begins here.

Now, one part of the text is of particular note. We here that: *"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 English translation here is pretty good, especially when you look at what Matthew wrote: *"And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and*

he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.”¹

Everything seems sweet and peaceful in the Gospel of Matthew. Not so in Mark. The heavens are literally “torn” apart! One scholar writes: *“The vision is more vivid in Greek than in most English translations... The passive voice here implies an act of God, and the verb is the same used of the Temple curtain which was “torn in two from top to bottom.” When Jesus died (15:38). In both cases, what had long been sealed is suddenly flung open.”²* The writer of the Gospel of Mark wants everyone to understand that what has just happened is something that can’t be undone. The barrier between God and humanity has literally been ripped apart, and unlike a hole in some drywall, this is something that can’t be changed. God has come to us, and everything is different because of it.

Which brings us to, well... us. That scholar was trying to answer the question “why does baptism matter?” And he makes a pretty interesting point. *“It matters because we are who God says we are.”* In the Gospel lesson we hear that Jesus is God’s beloved, and in the water and the word those same words are made about us. Much like the baptism of Jesus marks the beginning of his earthly ministry, our own baptisms become a “beginning” for us too. Yes, we are sinners. Yes, we will make mistakes. Yes, we will get things wrong and maybe even put a hole in the wall along the way, but NEVER forget that God has marked us as God’s own, we are God’s beloved... So why not take God at God’s word? Let’s see what amazing things we might be able to do... Amen.

¹ Matthew 3:16 NRSV

² Williamson, Lamar Jr. *Mark: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2009. p. 34.