

God on the Loose!
Mark 1:4-11 Rev. Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates January 8, 2012

Baptism of the Lord

When I was growing up, Christmas was such an exciting event, as it is for most kids. Of course, we spent the days before anticipating what was in the presents under the tree – shaking the box, imagining what could be there. And on Christmas morning, we were absolutely elated.

Our grandmother and great-mother – Nana and Gram – would try to get out to the farm where we lived by 7 in the morning, but of course, we were all up by 5 my brothers in the room with us girls – and watching out the window for them to arrive. We could peek into the living and see sort of see that there was a lot of stuff in there that Santa had brought, but we were not allowed to go in until Nana and Gram arrived.

With six kids, you can imagine the noise, the chaos and excitement of unwrapping and exclaiming over gifts and those of us waiting for our turn telling the opener to hurry up. It was an intensely high, emotional, exciting morning. Once the wrapping paper was all gathered up to be thrown away and the living room brought back into some level of order, my step-dad (who I usually refer to as “dad”) would say something that always got a loud rise out of us:

“Christmas is over!”

Of course, we all yelled, “No, it’s not! Don’t say that!”

And he would laugh his laugh that said, “I did it again.”

When we come to this third Sunday after Christmas, which is designated as “Baptism of the Lord” Sunday on the Christian liturgical calendar, I hear my dad’s voice saying “Christmas is over!” And, internally, at least, I am vehemently shouting “No it’s not!”

After all, we waited through the four weeks of Advent, barely singing any Christmas carols, hearing Scripture that bordered on scary at times with all the talk about the coming of the Lord and judgment.

Can’t we have more than two Sundays to just enjoy Jesus as a baby? Can’t we just relax in that celebration of the birth of Christ before we move on?

Well, we can enjoy the songs a bit longer. And certainly the joy of Christmas lives on in our hearts and minds. But the truth is, Christ was born for a purpose and he needs to grow up to accomplish that work.

Mark starts his story of Jesus, not with the birth story, but with the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Luke tells us Jesus was about 30 years old when he was baptized – an age that was thought to be the time when a man was considered mature and ready for service, according to the Levite laws in Numbers, chapter 4.

We have already met Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist. We met him on the second Sunday of Advent as we were thinking about his cry in the wilderness to the people in the Judea countryside and in Jerusalem. "Prepare the way of the Lord!" He cried. Repent!

John's baptism was one of repentance and forgiveness of sins and people flocked out to the wilderness to be baptized by him in the river Jordan.

We can't help but notice that the wilderness seems to be the place where God does significant things with people. The Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years while God worked with them to shape them up as God's people. We will certainly come back to this "wilderness theme" and to this chapter in Mark when we begin the season of Lent.

And this image we have of John – his clothing of camel's hair, a leather belt, his diet of locust and honey – all remind us of the old prophets – in fact people were fairly sure he was the prophet Elijah who had come back again to prophecy.

"Repent!" he cried. But then, we wonder why Jesus – the Son of God – would come to John for baptism. Jesus, who was without sin, coming to enter into the waters that have been clouded with the sins of many. Surely Jesus did not need to repent!

What do you think of when you hear the word repent? Many of us think of all the bad things we've done, and we feel remorse and shame, and we ask for forgiveness – and sometimes we actually believe we are forgiven and we try to forgive ourselves and not feel so bad anymore. And there is that element in repentance. The Greek word is "metamelomai." It is a strong feeling of remorse.

But Mark uses the Greek word metanoias for repentance. It means "to see differently." There is the sense of regret if we see that what we were doing is not right and if we see that, we then live differently. It is called conversion. We change the way we live because we see things in a different, new light. It is an epiphany! In an epiphany, it is as if a veil has been lifted and we see clearly. In the epiphany of the Lord – Christ is manifested so he is known.

As the Blues Brother's shouted – "I've seen the light. Thank God almighty, I've seen the light!"

Still, why would Jesus be coming for baptism?

Mark tells us that when he came up out of the waters of baptism, Jesus saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. Think about that image. The heavens are torn apart. Another translation is they are ripped open. The Greek verb there is schizo – an almost violent verb that means to split or divide. It's where we get the word schism.

The question has been asked before many times – did Jesus know, growing up, that he was the Son of God? We know that he was found in the temple after his parents realized he was not with them, talking with the temple leaders – at the age of 12 – and asking his parents, Mary and Joseph, “do you not know I need to be about my Father’s business?”

We don't have any specific answers, however, to how much Jesus knew about who he was. Yet, if he had any doubts before, this event would give him the confirmation – the affirmation – the epiphany he would need to begin the journey to the cross.

The heavens were split opened and God's voice assured him – “You are my Son – the Beloved. With you I am well pleased.”

The heavens were ripped apart, the Holy Spirit descended to this man who was obedient in coming for baptism, this Son of God, this Word made flesh, as John puts it. This is God on the loose. God is no longer somewhere, up there, unreachable, untouchable, unknowable. God is on the loose in Jesus with the power of the Holy Spirit pulsing through his veins. A truly human person but the Son of God who comes to heal, to preach, to teach the people how to live, to call disciples (both then, and now) to be obedient to following him. He comes and nothing is the same ever again. We hear of lepers healed and restored to new life; of people with demons given relief; of the outcasts, the poor, the hated given love and made to know they are worthy of God's love and mercy. We hear that the lame walk and the dead rise.

With God on the loose death does not have the last word for us. We have new hope that those words in the funeral liturgy – “all of us go down to the dust” are not final. It ends with “even at the grave, we sing our song – alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!”

With God on the loose, even after Jesus has gone from earth, the Holy Spirit remains a powerful force in God's people – with the laying on of hands, people are given that power and amazing things happen in order to further spread the good news that God gave to all in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

I'd love for you to have that same sense of awe and empowerment that those disciples had – that the author of Mark had as he told this story of the life and work of Jesus, of the heavens being torn open and the Spirit of God being let loose for you!

It means that God isn't locked away in some sacred space way up in a place we call heaven. It means that God has the power to forgive, to transform your lives; to give you assurance and hope and comfort when you grieve because a loved one has died; when you have had your hopes dashed to the ground; when you lose your job or your savings; when your home is foreclosed on; when you face old age; when are afraid to die.

It means that we, the congregation at Holly Presbyterian Church, have more than ourselves to rely on. God is on the loose here among us, doing amazing things; leading and guiding and giving us new way of seeing so that we might continue to grow into God's vision for us as His Church.

1. When Jesus came to Jordan
To be baptized by John,
He did not come for pardon,
But as God's Holy One.
2. He came to share repentance
With all who mourn their sins,
To speak the vital sentence
With which good news begins.
3. He came to share temptation,
Our utmost woe and loss;
For us and our salvation
To die upon the cross.
4. So when the dove descended
On him, the Holy One,
The hidden years had ended,
The age of grace begun.

Glory to God for loosing the power of the Spirit in Christ and in us, His Church. God is still on the loose today – in our lives and in the Church. Feel, accept it and let it lead us in all we do.

Remember your baptism, and give thanks!