

**The First Sunday After Epiphany**  
**Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX**  
**7 January 2024**

**Mark 1:4-11**

Today we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord and all three readings give us stories of beginnings. In Genesis we see the very beginning of creation, in fact, the passage begins as such. It says, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth..." Then in the Epistle we are told about the beginning of the congregation in Ephesus. Acts 19 tell us, "While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples..." We know these were twelve disciples of John the Baptist who were then baptized into Christ by Paul and become the pillars or the foundation for one of the most important congregations in the first century. And then, the Gospel gives us the very beginning of the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

In Mark, Jesus simply "came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." There is no lengthy genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, as we see in Matthew. There are no detailed announcements by God's Angel of the birth of John the Baptist and of Jesus of Nazareth as in Luke. There is no divine scene in heaven where the Word was with God and was God, as we see in John. In fact, there are no infancy narratives at all, no shepherds, no census, no great political intrigue of a true King born in the shadows of the Roman empire who may be seen as a threat to their "divine" emperor. The Gospel starts with a few verses about John the Baptist and then introduces Jesus simply by saying he came from Nazareth. This statement in itself is jarring in its simplicity and symbolism.

It is almost as though Mark introduces the greatest story every told simply by saying, "In those days a man came from a peasant village in Haiti and was baptized by John." It is the most unremarkable introduction of any character in a great epic: "In those days Jesus came from Garbagetown USA..." Nazareth is so insignificant that it didn't even appear in any historical maps of the area. Even Nathanael, one of Jesus' disciples the Gospel of John (1:46) exclaims, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" There is no great historical narrative of his provenance as the promised Son of David, no great birth narratives of a mighty king, no adoration of shepherds or foreign emissaries, no great discourses about Christ's divinity and eternal existence. In fact, in Mark there is more emphasis placed on the origins of John the Baptist than of Jesus. The Gospel starts with the prophesy of Isaiah about John, not Jesus. "As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you...'"

Jesus' apparition on the earthly stage leave many questions Mark does very little to answer. He simply appears and is baptized by John. But there are significant differences between this baptism and the one narrated in the other Gospels. Let me do a brief comparison because I believe our lesson for today is found in those differences:

1. In Mark we see no great argument between John the Baptist and Jesus about the Baptism. There is no, "I need to be baptized by you and you come to me?"
2. In Mark there is no attempt to justify the fact that this Baptism is unnecessary. This is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and Jesus has no sins of which to repent. In Matthew, Jesus says the baptism "fulfills all righteousness." As if saying, "Let us do it for the sake of those present and to glorify God. Mark has no such statement.
3. In Mark the natural phenomena that precedes the divine voice is radically different than in the other Gospels. They tell us that the skies "were opened" and a voice was heard. This is quite gentle. But in Mark the skies are torn apart. Irreparably changed. This is a bookend in Mark. When he is baptized the skies are torn apart. When he dies (Mark 15:33-41,) "The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom." It is the same word at the beginning and at the end of Jesus earthly ministry. At Baptism the barrier of separation between God and humanity is irreparably torn in two. At his death, the barrier of separation between the Holy of Holies and the rest of the Temple is torn in two. Both Baptism and Crucifixion change the world forever. They destroy all divisions between God and humanity. Both in life and in death God breaks through any gulfs of separation to claim his own and to give them a new identity. Baptism represents a dying of self and a birth to new life. Death for the believer represents the end of a physical reality and new birth in God's own presence. Both are about death and both are about life. This is what Mark is trying to tell us.
4. Then the voice heard is also different. In Matthew the voice speaks to those present, "This is my Son..." In Luke, the skies are opened and the voice speaks to Jesus after the whole Baptism experience, later, when Jesus is alone in quiet prayer. In John there is no great voice from heaven, rather it is John the Baptist who gives testimony about Jesus when he says, "I am now saying that Jesus is the Son of God." But in Mark, the voice speaks directly to Jesus at the very moment of Baptism, and there is no indication that anyone else hears this voice. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." It is a private, intimate, loving

affirmation from the Father, just as he comes out of the water. It is a reminder of Jesus's identity before his mission even begins. It is an affirmation that the Father's love is not dependent on Jesus actions, but it has always been a reality in his life.

I love the simplicity of Mark's narrative, but also its brilliance. In Mark Jesus has done nothing at all for God or anyone else (during his public ministry. I am sure he did a lot of things to please God in his private life of preparation.) In fact, this is the first time we meet him. We haven't seen him before as a baby, as the incarnate Word, as the object of adoration of shepherds or foreign dignitaries, or even as a wise young man arguing with the teachers of the law when he was 12. Jesus has done nothing in his public ministry, and yet, God affirms his love for his son in a surprising way. God claims him as his own.

This is the real power of Baptism. God claims us as his own, not because of anything we do for him, but because we are his beloved, and he is well-pleased with us. God reaches out, breaks through the gulf of separation humanity has created between God and us, and claims us as his own. This is why I love baptizing babies. Before they are able to do anything for God, God reaches out and welcomes them into the fold. It is all about God's election of us. It is not about merit. It is not about us at all, but about the new life God freely offers to those who come under the wings of the Almighty.

Today, we will renew our baptism vows and we will be reminded of the promises made on our behalf when God first accepted us. Let us vow to die to anything that builds any separation between us and God. Let us enjoy the new spiritual life God gives those who belong to God. Today, imagine God's whisper in your ear, "You are my child, the beloved, in you I am well pleased. And it is not because of anything you have done. It is not because you get an A+ in religion or church attendance. It is not because you are better than your neighbors. You are my beloved because I created you and you are my vulnerable, precious child. I delight in you. I care so much for you that I sent my son to die for you. Remember that there is nothing that can ever make me love you less. Receive today once again that new life I gave you at Baptism, and remember that my love for you is unconditional."

This is what God is telling us today. I hope we will listen! Amen.