



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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JANUARY 10, 2021
BAPTISM OF THE LORD SUNDAY

Disruption Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:1-11

There is a lot packed into these opening verses of the Gospel of Mark. I especially like the way he begins this story: “The beginning of the gospel—the good news—of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” It is simple, straightforward, and powerful. He declares Jesus to be the Messiah, announces that it is good news, and begins to tell how it all came about. Granted we do not have Luke’s beautiful story of Jesus’ birth nor Matthew’s extensive genealogies to tie Jesus back to all of the heroes of the Jewish faith. We do not have John’s eloquent vision of Christ’s role in creation and his gift of life to us, but Mark is telling his story of Jesus. He certifies its authenticity by linking John the Baptist with the prophecies of Malachi and Isaiah, and we are on our way.

Like other itinerant prophets of the time, John emerged from the wilderness and began calling for the repentance of Israel. It had long been held that if all of the Hebrew people repented at once, God would send his Messiah at last. As is the case today, many of those so-called prophets spoke more about themselves than God. John, as we know, was different. His was a calling from God and he was there by the Jordan River to prepare his people for the Messiah’s coming. Then Jesus showed up.

What catches your attention in this story? Is it the scruffy looking prophet with the weird diet boldly calling the people to repentance? Is it the amazing claim that all of the people in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas were coming down to the valley to—did you catch it—confess their sins? Are you captivated by John’s promise that while he baptizes with water, the Messiah will baptize with the Holy Spirit? What does that even mean? Are you impressed with John’s humility that he is not even worthy to untie the thongs of the Messiah’s sandals?

There is so much to hear, to look at, to wonder about in this story, that I have long missed an important detail. Mark tells us that Jesus came down to the river and was baptized by John. When he came up out of the water, something happened. The heavens parted and the Spirit of God descended like a dove and blessed Jesus with divine approval.

I have always thought about that part of the story in this way: hundreds, perhaps thousands of people stand in and around the river on a bright, beautiful day. High above the river, large, puffy, cumulus clouds float by, the kind of clouds you like to look at as a kid, lying on your back and imagining the shapes and images they make. There is a festive mood all around as one by one people are plunged into the cool, shallow water by John. As Jesus himself steps up and dips under the water, one of these big, fluffy clouds floats by, partially obscuring the sun, then passes on as he comes up out of the water. A beam of light causes the drops of water streaming from his hair to glow, and a dove flies by, perhaps even lightly touching his head like a priest offering blessing.

That is the picture most of us see in our minds, I suspect, but I'm not so certain anymore that it happened that way. Mark doesn't tell us that a cloud floated by or gently parted to let the light through. No, he uses a strong word, even a violent word. Mark says the heavens were torn apart—split, severed, broken, ripped! I have the idea that it was perhaps a dark and gloomy day, perhaps threatening storms. It was one of those days when there is a sense of foreboding in the air, a day when the weather conveys more than just rain or wind. We have experienced hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, ice storms—the kind of weather that does not bode well for our safety. We have also experienced those times when the weather threatens and then miraculously changes and the sun comes out.

I think something like that happened when Jesus was baptized. Things looked and felt bad, stormy, foreboding. Then the clouds were ripped apart, shredded as the sun broke through. And a dove, sensing that danger was past, flew over the river and gave blessing to Jesus.

Angela Parker, a professor of New Testament at the McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta calls this event a “divine fragmentation” which has ongoing consequences.¹ Opening my eyes to what the story tells us she points to all of the unrest, distress, and injustice—the darkness—that was going on in Jerusalem at the time as the reason so many people had come down to the river to be baptized. In the person of Jesus, and particularly in his baptism, God was fragmenting all of the woes of the world for our sake.

¹Angela Parker, “Living By the Word: January 10, Baptism of the Lord,” *The Christian Century*, (December 30, 2020), 22.

I agree with Professor Parker's insightful reading of the story. Instead of a fragmentation, however, I want to call what happened a divine disruption, an ongoing act of God which plays itself out in and through the life of Jesus the Christ.

Why was this particular day at the river dark and stormy and gloomy? That is how life felt for many of the Hebrew people. We know about their struggles being under the oppressive thumb of Caesar. There were economic hardships, social challenges, political machinations, and spiritual shenanigans that made life much more difficult than need be. The weight of hundreds of years of struggle weighed upon them. The clash of their hopes and fears made it hard to breathe. It was a dark and stormy time in their history. Mark wants us to know what it was like. He wants to convey the drama of what was happening. Dark clouds shadowed the lives of the people gathered on the banks of the Jordan River that day.

When I chose this passage and selected the title of this sermon, I was thinking about the past year and the things, the disruptions, that continue to plague us at this moment—the pandemic, the injustice and inequities that are persistent, the protests and riots that express rage all around, the deep wounds that are festering into hatred and division, the fear of what might yet happen, the desire to be better, and the struggle to sacrifice in order to be so. I was thinking about all of the things going on in our community and nation and world.

The idea for this sermon came days before Epiphany, January 6, Wednesday, if you remember, a day when we celebrate the in-breaking of God's light into our lives. Yet, I cannot think of a darker, more ominous, more frightening day we have experienced since 9/11 or the flood of 1999.

Let me be clear. I am not speaking politically. Do not hear anything that I say as condemning or propping up any political party or person. While I would never claim for myself the honored and burdensome role of prophet, there is a long tradition of the people of God responding to the actions and attitudes of the people and their leaders. The Bible is full of such instances.

January 6—Epiphany—was a dark day for our nation. It brought a darkness as deep as the clouds of Covid 19 with its rampant illness and death, a darkness that shadows persistent racism, social inequities, and a growing rift among the children of God. What happened at our Capitol building on Wednesday was an assault, not only on our democracy, but

literally an attack on neighbor by neighbor, a complete disregard for truth, a reliance upon lies, and a desire—a desire—to do harm to the places, the people, and the principles that comprise our nation. Any act of violence by one person on another grieves the heart of God. That is why the story of Cain and Abel is the first of the stories that point out the extent to which we can stray from the intention God has for his children. For a group, a mob, of people to desecrate the symbol of our democracy, to threaten and carry out harm on other people, to cause four deaths, and to do so, in some cases, under the guise of God’s blessing and initiative is blasphemous at best and pure evil at worst.

The past year has been hard, very hard. Our lives have been disrupted by many things that are frightening, challenging, sad, and heartbreaking. It has been a hard year, but it has not been hopeless.

“The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ,” Mark declares. Then comes confession, repentance, the ripping of the gloom, and the glory of God’s way. That is our hope. That is what Jesus came to do. That is what God is about in our lives.

The gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to examine our hearts, to test our ideas and loyalties and assumptions against Jesus. Do the thoughts we relish and massage and share to the world correspond with the teachings of our Lord to whom we have pledged loyalty and life above all else? When God disrupts the darkness that has settled upon us, when the clouds are ripped apart and the light shines through, what does it illumine about us? Jesus brings light to our world, not darkness. He calls for truth, not lies. He offers healing, not more hurt. He calls for unity, not division—except when it means we must separate ourselves from the powers of darkness to stand in the light of God’s day.

Jesus brings a great disruption to the ways in which we otherwise want to run our world. Jesus brings a disruption to illness, injury, and disease and offers health and wholeness. Jesus brings disruption to oppression and offers freedom. Jesus brings disruption to poverty and offers prosperity. Jesus brings disruption to bigotry and prejudice and injustice and offers the welcome and wholeness of life fitting for children of God. Jesus brings disruption to a self-centeredness that assumes we know better than anyone else and offers a realization that we are all gifted as children of God. Jesus brings disruption to a culture of death and offers abundant life. Jesus brings disruption to a world that no longer values life and offers eternal life that begins here and

now. When Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were ripped open and God spoke. Jesus is the great disruption that brings light and hope to an otherwise dark and hopeless world.

On the NPR program *Fresh Air* the other night, reporter and author Lawrence Wright spoke about his research and writings on plagues and pandemics through the centuries. His extensive research brought about some important insights. When asked by host Terry Gross what was the worst pandemic he had researched, he responded that the Black Plague or Death in 14th century Italy was the most fascinating because of the consequences. He went on to say,

You know, the Black Death essentially began the process of ending the Middle Ages. All the presumptions that . . . we had about the society, about religion, about . . . medieval medicine, they were thrown out the window. And what eventually replaced the Middle Ages was a renaissance . . . And it inspired me to think that . . . we could maybe have a kind of renaissance politically and economically, because we've seen how our country has failed in so many different ways. And the pandemic has been kind of like an X-ray into the broken places in our society.²

If God could rip apart the suffering and death of the Black Death seven hundred years ago and bring about fresh understanding, discovery, and beauty in many forms, could God shred the darkness that surrounds us today and bring new health, wholeness, and unity to our world? The answer is an unequivocal, "YES!" This is God's work in the world through Jesus, a disruption of the disruption, a marshaling of resources to overcome challenges. A renaissance, not only of politics and economics, but of life itself, a resurrection to a better, more complete, life for us all.

But we have to go down to the river. We have to confess our sin. We have to offer repentance. And we have to come up out of the water eager to accept the blessing of God which is not merely a pat on the head. Rather, God's blessing is a parental shove sending us back into the world to share the light of his goodness with everyone.

²Lawrence Wright, speaking with Terry Gross on NPR's *Fresh Air*, "How Mistakes, Missed Opportunities Allowed COVID-19 To Ravage The U.S.," (January 7, 2021); available online at: <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/07/954387123/how-mistakes-missed-opportunities-allowed-covid-19-to-ravage-the-u-s>.

Test yourself against the Child of Bethlehem, the Youth of Nazareth, the Teacher of Galilee, the Sacrificial Lamb on the cross, and the Risen Christ in the Garden and see whether you stand in the light of God's love or in the shadows of the world's hate. Test yourself to discover whether you are hiding in the shadows or living in the light. Test yourself to find out whether you are the disruption bringing harm to the world or you are responding to God's disruption of evil and offering hope and healing to others.

God in Jesus Christ brings a holy and blessed disruption to the darkness of evil that we promulgate. May we all find ourselves in the blessing of the Light. Amen.

January 10, 2021

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We are grateful, O God, for the light of your love which reveals our faults and sins and offers us grace and forgiveness. We are grateful for the fatherly compassion that, rather than condemning and rejecting us, prompts repentance and change.

Despite the hardships and horrors that are inherent in life, there is so much goodness for which to be grateful. The light of a new day, the voice of a dear friend, the love of family, and the beauty of your world encourage and help us. Yet, we know that even those simple gifts are not readily available to all people. For many of our brothers and sisters, the dawn brings only another day of suffering. There are no friends who call and family does not offer love that nurtures and heals. Even the beauty of nature is obscured by poverty, injustice, hatred, and disease. Into the lives of all who are lonely, oppressed, and afraid, shine the light of your love through us.

The events of this past week have shocked and wounded us yet again. Most of us cannot understand the degree of anger and the disregard for truth and justice that we witnessed. We pray for those who died and for their families who grieve in ways that are all too familiar to us all. We pray for healing for all who were harmed. We pray that you will help us heal our divisions, soothe our minds, calm our spirits, open our hearts, and repair the breach in our nation that snakes its way into our personal lives.

Help us to see one another again, not as enemies, but as sisters and brothers of one heavenly Parent. Unleash the generosity of spirit that shares our gifts of wisdom, ingenuity, and compassion so that together we might split the darkness of this time and overcome the challenges that threaten us all.

Remind us, O God, that we do not determine who receives your grace other than in our own openness to it or rejection of it. Bring us all to our knees in these critical days when we face crises brought on by disease, injustice, disparity, natural disasters, hatred, and a simple lack of compassion. Lift us up from our repentant stance and shine the light of your goodness on us that we might reflect you to the world. Amen.