

Our Astonishing God

Mark 1:4-11

A sermon given by Rev. Casey W. FitzGerald on Baptism of our Lord Sunday, January 11, 2009, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Text

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."

There is no inn and certainly no manger, no baby Jesus, no Mary and Joseph, no swaddling clothes, or smelly, yet amazingly well behaved animals, no shepherds or kings or *any* of those things that we traditionally associate with Christ's entrance into our world. The beginning of Mark's gospel lets us know that this is the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God...but beyond that, the gospel intro seems pretty sparse when compared with Luke and Matthew's retelling of the coming of Jesus into our world.

There is just this:

- There is a man named John, donning a camel's hair frock and leather belt (apparently standard garb for prophets ushering in the end of an age—as if they didn't have it hard enough).ⁱ He eats a less-than-desirable fare of locusts and wild honey, and wades in the waters of the river Jordan.
- People, a.k.a. "sinners," have come from far and wide to find forgiveness of their sins through baptism by John.
- From what we know about John from our other gospels, he did not take human sinfulness lightly.... As author Frederick Buechner puts it, "The kingdom was coming all right, [John] said, but if you thought it was going to be a pink tea, you'd better think again. If you didn't shape up, God would give you the axe like an elm with the blight or toss you into the incinerator like what's left over when you've lambasted the good out of the wheat.... Your only hope, he said, was to clean up your life as if your life depended on it, which it did, and get baptized in a hurry as a sign that you had."ⁱⁱ
- And so they came to this furry-robed man to confess and find renewal in the Jordan.

Following this brief description of John and his ministry, John proclaims to the people that *someone else* is coming...someone of much greater significance than John himself. He goes as far as to say that he would be

unworthy even to be a servant tying Jesus' sandals. "I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit," (v.8) he announces.

And John's pronouncement sets the stage for what follows...

- Jesus comes down to the river—in the same manner of all those sinners before him—to be baptized.
- We can conclude from the text that John submerged Jesus in the water, as he had done to so many others before him.
- Therefore, in Mark's gospel, Jesus' very first act is one of humility and submission.
- Like every sinner, who in fear and trembling, in acknowledgment and confession, and in faith and hope had done before him, Jesus made his way to the waters to be cleansed—he *submitted himself* to the one who was "unworthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals."

We read throughout the gospels that John the Baptist preaches of God's wrath, using that charming phrases like "brood of vipers" to indicate just how he feels about people...and, yet, he has predicted the coming of one who will turn all those assumptions about God on their heads. Here comes God's son Jesus, here is God in Jesus, *submitting* himself to be cleansed, *as if his sins were as great as ours. This is hardly an act of godly wrath.*

John had done these baptisms many times before...but *unlike* many times before, when Jesus emerged from the Jordan, we are told that the heavens were torn apart and the spirit descended like a dove. "And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" (vv.10-11) Even as we have witnessed the humility and vulnerability of Jesus in his submission to baptism, so too we witness, in this text from Mark, Jesus' divinity. He is the answer to prayers from long ago. On the first Sunday of Advent, we heard the great cry of the prophet Isaiah: "*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down....*" (Isaiah 64:1) And roughly 500 years later, it seems Isaiah's prayer for a dramatic move from God has been answered. Considering this Markan text, Donald Juel and Patrick Keifert wrote, "The scene is wrong; the career of the promised offspring of David should begin with appropriate splendor; Jesus should be hailed by crowds. As it is, his inauguration occurs in the desert, away from centers of civilization. The attendants are the hordes who come to be baptized by John. There are no cheers, no conversions. The tearing of the heavens makes no obvious impact on any audience but the narrator's—just as the conclusion of Jesus' ministry, the tearing of the temple curtain, makes no obvious impact. The world is a different place because of Jesus, we learn. A barrier separating God from his creation has been torn away. But people still live as if nothing had happened. The epiphany makes no obvious impact.... The Jesus who comes to accomplish God's promised deliverance is not the sort expected. Throughout the story he will consort with the wrong sorts of people and will trouble the righteous. The story opens with an epiphany, but that epiphany is a surprise and a challenge."ⁱⁱⁱ

At Westminster's early Christmas Eve service, amidst the glorious chaos that characterizes any such event, I attempted to remind our congregation of what an incredible shock it must have been when God came down in such a humble way—that God chose to dwell among us in the form of the most vulnerable of creatures—a human infant. The following night I sat with my family and a number of close friends we had invited over for Christmas dinner. Among the group was a friend of mine with whom I share many interests—faith not being one of them. We have very similar tastes in books, movies and television shows—and while we do have lengthy and "important" discussions on such things as whether or not the creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* will be coming out with a new series this spring (which he will, for any fans interested), we rarely ever discuss matters of faith. I do know that he calls himself an "agnostic," and that he believes in some ultimate power or

god, but not much beyond that. But on this particular night, he overheard my mother mention my use of superheroes in the service. This caught his attention and his head quickly turned toward me, intrigued at what on earth I could've possibly said. I went on to briefly explain to him how ludicrous it seemed that when the people cried out for God to send a savior, God sent them a baby (after all, babies can't even walk or talk, and they certainly don't have superpowers). I said how silly it seemed that God would make God's self vulnerable for our sake. And when I mentioned this vulnerability of God, this act of solidarity with the human condition—my friend had a look on his face like I'd never seen before. He looked at me almost as if I was lying! "Really? I've NEVER heard that." He was astonished and amazed at the very concept of a vulnerable God. And though I do not believe he had any sort of "conversion," it was incredible to watch someone hear this idea for the first time—to witness his response. It was a joyful moment for me, as it brought newness to my own understanding of the astounding nature of God.

For most of us, our issue is not that, like my dear friend, we haven't heard of God's sacrifice for us—it is that we are *no longer astonished by its occurrence*. And I suspect, if we are no longer astonished by its occurrence, we may not be moved to react according to the incredible gift that we have received. And incredible, it is. After all, while Mark may not give us the birth story—he has given us a story of *new birth*. And this is the promise we hold to be true in our baptisms—that, as when Jesus was baptized, we have received new life. The heavens have been torn open, God has come down—a new age has dawned. As we say so often in worship, "the old life has passed away and a new life has begun." But while the moment of baptism comes and goes, the promises we have made must be sustained and renewed. For the other part of our story is this: in receiving new life we must first experience a sort of death. Rev. Roy Harrisville explains: "It is a death of the old Adam and Eve who are crucified together with Christ. In this death we, the baptized, are proclaimed children of God and transformed into offspring who may see through such death to the rising of new life in resurrection."^{iv} We who proclaim new life and the promise of resurrection in our baptisms must remember that life is now different...even as the world around us feels so very familiar.

If you sit here today baptized already—I implore you (even as I implore myself) to remember why it is that you, or someone who loved you, came to these waters for baptism. Remember God's claim on you—it is the claim of one who has given *everything* for you. And if you sit in this room and have not yet been baptized—these words are also for you. For even before you were born, God called you by name. You are always invited to acknowledge and return God's claim upon you through baptism.

And in response to God's claim on all of our lives, we must surrender our whole selves—even as Jesus surrendered himself...

Surrender...

Our pride

Our self-interest

Our fears and doubts

Our worry and regret

Our despair and shame

Our jealousy and hatred

Surrender all of these things, even as we claim for ourselves

Christ's peace

Compassion

Service

Love
Faith
And hope.

According to Mark, following Jesus' baptism, the Spirit IMMEDIATELY drove Jesus into the wilderness, where he would live among the wild beasts and face the greatest of temptation. And it is, perhaps, into the wilderness that we leave this place today. For even as we are changed, the world seems terribly *unchanged*—just look at what's going on in the world whether it be in the Gaza strip or on the streets of our cities—injustice, violence, poverty, and so many more unspeakable ills abound.

But do not despair—for we who are changed know that God wanted more for this world, and so he sent us Jesus Christ. And because of this knowledge, we who are changed can be the agents of God's peace and love in this world. Thanks be to God, who, out of an astonishing love for us, gave us his only Son—through whom we have been reconciled to God forever. Amen.

ⁱ It is believed that the description of John is meant to associate him with Elijah (2 Kings 1:8), whose return was sometimes regarded as the end of the age. (Info from Harper Collin's Study Bible, NRSV)

ⁱⁱ Buechner, Frederick, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who*, 77-78.

ⁱⁱⁱ Juel, Donald H. and Keifert, Patrick R., "A Markan Epiphany: Lessons from Mark 1" *Word & World* 8/1 (1988), 81-82.

^{iv} Harrisville, Roy A., "Between Text and Sermon: Mark 1:4-11," in *Interpretation* (1993), 399.