

Tracy Daub  
1/10/21—University Presbyterian Church  
Mark 1:4-11

## A NEW DAY AND A NEW WAY

Maybe you thought Christmas was over. Maybe you've already taken down the tree and boxed up the decorations. But wait just a minute. For the scripture today gives us yet *another* Christmas story. Now, at a first glance, this story from Mark's gospel does not seem *at all* like a Christmas story. It is, in fact, the story of Jesus' baptism. But this story about Jesus' baptism is essentially Mark's version of the Christmas story.

Mark's gospel does not include any stories of Jesus' birth or infancy. Unlike in the gospels of Luke and Matthew where we hear about the angels who announce the birth, and about shepherds and wise men coming to see the babe in the manger, Mark's gospel does not include any stories at all of Jesus as an infant. Instead, Mark begins his gospel account with a fully grown Jesus. And the first story Mark offers us readers is this account of Jesus' baptism.

But this story, this baptismal story, can be interpreted as Mark's *version* of the Christmas story if we understand the Christmas story to be the revelation of God's plan of salvation. That's what Christmas is about, after all, isn't it? The birth of Jesus reveals something, right? The birth of Jesus reveals God coming to us with saving love. And that is exactly what takes place at Jesus' baptism. We see in this baptismal story the revealing of God's plan of love, of God's plan of salvation just as surely as the angels revealed the message of God's saving love to the shepherds or the star revealed the way to God's saving love to the magi. Jesus' baptism is Mark's version of the Christmas story where God's revelation of love is found in Christ.

And this revealing comes about quite dramatically in this baptismal story. We are told that as Jesus was coming up out of the water following his baptism, that the heavens were torn

apart and the Spirit of God descended upon him. Think about all those Christmas gifts placed under the tree this past Christmas. In order to see what was hidden behind all that beautiful wrapping paper you had to tear open the paper to reveal the gift. In a similar way, Mark tells us that at Jesus' baptism the heavens—the barrier that people believed separated God from humanity—the heavens were torn apart. God who was once hidden, had come to earth and was revealed in that one who stood dripping wet in the Jordan River. And then this revelation is made even clearer when God's voice is heard stating, "This is my Son, the Beloved." Can you see how this is a Christmas story, the story of Emmanuel, of God coming to us, of God with us? Matthew and Luke use the infancy stories to teach us about God coming to join us in our brokenness. But in Mark, this message is found at Jesus' baptism, where Jesus joins our broken human condition and receives baptism in solidarity with us imperfect human beings.

Mark begins his gospel with a disclosure and a declaration—with the dramatic tearing open of the heavens to reveal one who stand in solidarity with us, and with the declaration "this is my Son." So we have this disclosure and then this declaration. And then Mark *ends* his gospel in the exact same way. He repeats the disclosure and the declaration at the end of his gospel. When Jesus dies on the cross, Mark tells us that the curtain of the temple was torn in two—just as the heavens were torn in two at Jesus' baptism. This curtain was used to separate the very special part of the Temple called the Holy of Holies—the place where God was believed to dwell—from the rest of the Temple. Only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies and only once a year. But at Jesus death on the cross, this curtain that separated God from the people of God, was ripped in half—to reveal that the once hidden God was now accessible to all people, not just the high priests, and was found in the suffering man on the cross. And then we hear the

*declaration*, similar to the voice at Jesus' baptism, only this time it is the Roman centurion standing watch over the crucifixion who declares, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

Mark bookends his gospel, the beginning and the end, with these examples of disclosure declaration—with the tearing open to reveal the One who joins us in our brokenness and suffering and with the declaration of Jesus' identity as God's Son.

Jesus' baptism discloses and declares something about us as well. It discloses that God is with us in and through everything this earthly life can throw at us. And Jesus baptism declares not only his identity but our identity. We are children of God. We are disciples of Christ. And this knowledge of God's love and this identity we have been given as children of God and disciples of Christ enables us to be born a new.

After all, isn't that the fundamental meaning of baptism? At its core, baptism symbolizes rebirth. Historically, Christians who were baptized were dressed in new robes, symbolizing their new life in Christ. Baptism symbolizes new birth.

When Jesus was baptized and joined in solidarity with humanity's need and brokenness, it was to initiate our rebirth, to give us a new day and a new way. Now maybe we can understand why the story from Genesis is paired with this baptism story—for at the beginning of Creation, the Spirit of God moved over the face of the earth creating order out of chaos and light where there was darkness. At Creation, the Spirit of God created a new day and a new way. And that is what takes place at Jesus' baptism for us: order out of chaos and light where there is darkness. Jesus' baptism offers us a new day every single day of our lives—a new day grounded in God's mercy and forgiveness for us and our worst mistakes, a new day grounded in the hope we have in God's love even at our darkest times, a new day grounded in a fresh start. What a

gift to be given a new day, over and over again. And we are offered a new *way*—the way of compassion, the way of service, the way of generosity, the way of forgiveness, the way of love.

The gifts we are given at baptism, this gift of a new day and a new way, are not things we can box up and put away as we do with Christmas. These gifts are intended to give us an identity, to shape how we understand ourselves and how we live with others. The great Protestant reformer Martin Luther is said to have placed his hand on his head each day and declare, “I’ve been baptized.” It was his way of remembering *daily* his identity and the new day and the new way he had been given through Christ.

The events this week underscore all the chaos and division that permeate our nation and our world. But we recall with hope how on the day of Creation, God’s Spirit moved over the watery chaos calling forth order and light. We recall that God’s Spirit draws near to us in the waters of baptism to dispel the chaos and the darkness with a new day and a new way. Thanks be to God!