

“Standing In Line With the Beloved”

Jan. 7, 2018 – Baptism of the Lord

Genesis 1:1-5

1:1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 1:2 the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. 1:3 Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. 1:4 And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. 1:5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Acts 19:1-7

(NT: p. 139)

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” They replied, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” Then he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They answered, “Into John’s baptism.” Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.” On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied—altogether there were about twelve of them.

Mark 1:4-11

1:4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 1:5 And 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. 1:6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 1:7 He 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. 1:8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." 1:9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 1:10 And 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. 1:11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Because, ‘in the beginning’ we couldn’t see a thing, God said, “Let there be light.” And the world had its very first Epiphany. God has been creating light for us to see by ever since. Epiphanies are special kinds of moments which allow us a new way to see or understand something, that help to bring something to light. Epiphanies have been called ‘aha’ moments depicted by the light bulb coming on over someone who finally ‘get’s it.” In the church Epiphany is the season following Christmas when the light of the world begins to be seen, begins to be known, begins to create ‘aha’ moments in the lives of those encountered.

It starts today with this story of the Baptism of Jesus. We get the story as Mark tells it so there’s not a lot of detail. Not much narrative. Not so much to hang an ‘aha’ on. But, because we’ve read Matthew and Luke we know some more of the back story. We know about John. We know he’s Jesus cousin. We know he’s the one who is supposed to be on the lookout for Jesus. We know that in the story of the church he is Isaiah’s ‘one who cries out in the wilderness, the one who preaches repentance. What we don’t know is whether or not he and Jesus have ever laid eyes on one another. Other than that ‘womb to womb’ telepathy in Luke 1 did they know each other? In one of the other gospels John even admits he didn’t recognize Jesus.

In Mark’s account we don’t know any of that. We know there’s a prophecy. We know John, “Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt

around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.” Which right from the start makes him interesting enough for us to read on and surely interesting enough for the people of that day to take a day trip outside of Jerusalem and the surrounding area to get a look at this guy who is causing all this commotion. After all, aha, God hasn’t had an active prophet at work, at least that history remembers, for about 400 years. The people are ready so they go looking.

I don’t know about you but I’d like to know what this would look like. I don’t have much of a visual relationship with the Jordan river valley or the scene other than what’s in church art or Sunday school pictures. So it takes more of a jaunt of the imagination. I’ve always thought that John the B. has an affinity with street preachers. There are some pretty wild ones out there. One time, in Atlanta, I was with a group of youth and at the 5 points Marta station this old woman in a navy blue dress with a white carnation corsage who had two other women fanning here was preaching up a storm. People were crowded around and curious right in the middle of Atlanta in the middle of a summer day. As we walked by she addressed my little group with a repent or go to your doom tirade that these kids had never heard before. It took a while to talk through that one.

Later today, while JAG fans are waiting in line to get through security to get into the game, over by Gate 1, there will be a guy with a bull horn and an 8 foot tall cross, who will have a kind of wild look in his eye and who will be preaching a message of what? Of repentance. It’ll sound, at least in tone a lot

like, "You brood of vipers, who warned you of the days to come. 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Which is, of course, what John had to say.

If John the Baptist were around today that's where he'd be, where the people were, and he'd no doubt be standing right next to this guy, camel's hair coat and all. He'd be ranting a raving and making people terribly uncomfortable. But curious.

What drives a guy to stand out there? What makes him willing to be laughed at, ridiculed, and mostly ignored? Simple. IN his heart and in his mind he's as called to be out there with his bullhorn as I am to be standing in this pulpit and as John the Baptist was to be standing knee deep in the Jordan baptizing one sorry sinner after another who came to him out of curiosity but who then felt compelled by the spirit of God to walk out to him in the water and got wet because, hey, if nothing else, better safe than sorry.

Think about John. We've no idea how long he's been at this. We've no idea how many he's baptized with water. We do know that he's waiting. He's constantly scanning the crowd waiting to see 'the one' waiting patiently in the line. We know he's wondering about and looking for the one who is to come. And we know the one to come is Jesus. Here's the thing. If we'd been there we very well may have been standing next in line to a normal looking guy who will

take his turn with the Baptist, exchange a few words, and the Baptist, just like we've been preparing to experience will scoop up a double handful of water and splash in on the man's head and then the absolutely unexpected happens. The scene is changed in an instant. The heavens will be torn open and the Holy, looking like a descending like a dove will come down to him. And a voice will come from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

When we hear about Jesus being claimed by the voice of God as he emerges dripping from the Jordan we for the first time ever written down in Mark, we understand just how powerfully special Jesus is. This story of naming and blessing and claiming is of first importance to Mark's gospel story. God lets us know right from the start, "This is the beginning of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, that Jesus is to be one set apart; to be listened to, one to be revered and honored.

Again, in this moment God identifies Jesus, not only as his son, not only as one who is beloved, which is vital to our understanding of him, but also as one who is worthy of being heard.

Here, just 11 verses deep in the gospel of Mark we get this epiphany. God sent this son into the world because we are loved and because **he** is baptized and belovedwe, like Jesus, are baptized into be-lovedness.

In baptism it doesn't matter who we are, God says, you are my beloved daughter – you are my son – infant, young/middle-aged/old, the picture of

health/not very healthy, sometimes wonderfully enthusiastic and sometimes irritating in your expectations for yourself and others -- you are my beloved. I am delighted by your very being!" You are my beloved, weak of eyes and too thick in the middle and woefully neglectful of your health and not as good a husband or father as you can be – but you are my beloved. You are my child.

God is claiming us. So on the baptism of the Lord Sunday we have once again the epiphany that says "God loves **me** no matter what?"// And I should live like it.

We renew our baptismal vows, renew our commitment by symbolically entering the cleansing, if dangerous water, renew our commitment to be part of a community of faith that seeks justice and loves mercy. We come, by way of the water, to the table, to taste and see and know that the Lord is good.

Every time we come to font and table it is a mindful Epiphany of God's love for God's beloved.