

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Third Sunday after Christmas

January 10, 2021

Psalm 29:1–11 (ESV):

- 1 Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
- 2 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness.
- 3 The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD, over many waters.
- 4 The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.
- 5 The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
- 6 He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.
- 7 The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.
- 8 The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
- 9 The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth
and strips the forests bare,
and in his temple all cry, "Glory!"
- 10 The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.
- 11 May the LORD give strength to his people!
May the LORD bless his people with peace!

First Reading: Genesis 1:1–5 (ESV):

The Creation of the World

1 In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. 2 The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

3 And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. 4 And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

EPISTLE: Romans 6:1–11 (ESV):

Dead to Sin, Alive to God

6 What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? 2 By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? 3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. 6 We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. 7 For one who has died has been set free from sin. 8 Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 9 We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. 10 For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. 11 So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

THE GOSPEL - Mark 1:4–11 (ESV):

4 John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. 7 And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8 I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

The Baptism of Jesus

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. **10** And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. **11** And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

Sermon 2 – Sunday of the Epiphany

"Begin the New Beginning"

Mark 1:4-11

Dear friends,

Mark today is all about beginnings. It is the rather abrupt beginning of His Gospel, in true Mark form he just starts without a lot of fanciness. It is the beginning of Jesus ministry, and it is the beginning of John the Baptizer too. Beginnings are here for us too, we are at the beginning of a New Year, we are praying for a new beginning with the pandemic and all that, so basically this has been on my mind lately. It's easy to talk about what's beginning, we can talk about what it means, might do that, but all Christian faith is a series of new beginnings. That can sound tedious but it is a blessed thing, as true for us now as it was for them then. For a Christian, where does it all begin, how does that beginning effect us, and what do we have to say about it now?

Describing Mark is always self-defeating, even though I do it a lot. Mark is best shown to you because that is what Mark wants to do. Mark doesn't want to bog you down with pages of exposition or description, Mark wants to show you Jesus the miracle worker, Jesus the Son of God, and the way Mark does that it is very jarring and very uneven. What I mean by that is, as odd as Jesus can be in other Gospels, in Mark Jesus can be very off-putting. He doesn't do what you expect, He doesn't react in a predictable way, and He never seems to stop. Jesus in Mark is always zooming from one miracle to the next, one point of teaching to the next, happy one moment and mad in the following moment. It's a strange look at him.

Why? Jesus is the Son of God. As reductive as that is to say, that explains Jesus and how He behaves in Mark, and one of the theories we have on Mark is that this is why He

writes this way. He wants to show that Jesus is not predictable, He's not comfortable, He's not anything like we have on this Earth. Jesus is the Son of God, and that means He is His own thing, and He's going to do His own thing and not waste a moment of it. There's blessing in all of this, because this strange, off-the-wall Jesus is the way He is in order to be what He needs to be, and Mark shows us this as well.

Before Jesus, we get to John. **“John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.”** As with Jesus, this is the broadest possible strokes for the man. Nothing about his birth, just a short description of what he does. And what he does is what we do, baptizing and proclaiming repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Mark's beginning begins with Baptism, which is fitting, because this is where all Christianity begins. Baptism is water and the name of God together, following the promises God gave to us when He built the church. We put water on a person, we dedicate that person to God, and viola forgiveness of sins is given to that person. How? God established this right from the start of the church, He made the church to do just this. Christ was crucified on the cross, and that is when all sins everywhere at all times are paid for. He suffered in our place. That kind of pain, that kind of isolation from God's love, that burning fire of God's wrath that made Christ scream in agony about being forsaken, that was our fate. Instead of us taking that, and we could not have taken it for a moment, Jesus took it. That's how we are able to be forgiven. God's wrath towards sin was satisfied with the punishment He meted out on His son. But that took place 2000 years ago in a faraway place. How does it get to us? Baptism. That is the pipeline that delivers the forgiveness of sins to us. Christ is crucified on the cross, yes, but when we are baptized, Christ is crucified for *us* on the cross. Baptism takes all that satisfaction and gives it to us, it makes us exchange seats with Jesus, so that Christ's holiness becomes ours, and our sin becomes Jesus' sin. It is there for the specific person. John forecasts and demonstrates this in his actions. Each individual must believe in Jesus, each individual must receive Jesus, and Baptism delivers both the salvation and the reception of it. It is the gift, and the hands to receive the gift. John shows us this. The Gospel says that the entire country was coming out to be baptized by him, this is a horde of people, a veritable mob, and John is queuing

them up and baptizing each one. He doesn't turn on a firehose and spray the whole lot of them, he brings them into the river one by one, puts water on them, and by this their repentance, their desire for forgiveness, is made clear.

We do a mirror of this when we gather. To gather in church is to gather before God seeking that same forgiveness and demonstrating that same repentance. 2000 years later, the church is still people gathered with each other, wanting to hear from God, and needing to hear that God still loves them, still forgives them, still has a use for them. Baptism begins this, the Word of God feeds it through your ears, the Lord's Supper feeds it through your mouth. You and I aren't just here because we like each other. We're here to restart the engine of our Christian faith, put gas in it, and go forward as children of God.

Now John is promising something to come, but that promise is just what I have been talking about. **“7 And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8 I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”** He describes Jesus as one who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit, and that is precisely what He has done with each of you. The Holy Spirit is not a ghost, the Holy Spirit is not some crazy animating force that makes you go nuts or speak in tongues or transforms you into some kind of special Christian. The Holy Spirit is the one delivering Jesus to you, the one who makes Jesus dwell in you. At your Baptisms, each of you has been delivered that Spirit, and that Spirit has given you Jesus crucified. That Spirit didn't make you special, it instead ignited Christian faith inside of you, kindling the fire of your belief, and feeding that fire by hearing about Jesus, thinking about Jesus, reading about Him, wrestling with Him, and occasionally being humbled by Him. It is that Holy Spirit that is silently at work in you, quietly fiddling behind the scenes, leading you to new insights, new depths of faith, even when you aren't aware of it.

So John begins with the beginning, Jesus does too, and the beginning is your new beginning. To be baptized is to be made new. To return to Baptism, by going back to God in your faith, and saying, I need that again, is to be made new again. This is the perpetual duty and lifecycle of the Christian, sometimes a joy, sometimes a thing that makes us ashamed, sometimes just another Sunday in yet another year of yet another life. Your new beginning is new every day, it is there for you every day, just as your life is new every

day. If you feel absolutely stuck in your old you, in your old habits, or even in your old life, your old era, take it from someone who has felt that way for longer than I care to admit. This is new. This is change. This is a whole new life, even if everything around you stays the same. Forgiveness starts over. I cannot emphasize that enough. Forgiveness puts away the old hurts, the old mistakes, the old need for revenge, for payback, or even for simply squaring the deal. God's forgiveness starts you over, dials you back to zero, and sets you off on that same old life with a new goal: Do it better. Do it right. Do it without hate or hurt, do it with love and compassion. You would think that perpetually starting over means you never get anywhere. Far from it. Jesus promises that through this endless loop of new life, that your faith grows, your sanctified self grows. Every loop, every day, brings God's love anew, and that love is what charges who you are and who you will become. You'll never get there here on this Earth, you may never even get rid of your same old sins here on this Earth. You'll still snap, lose your patience, you'll still feel stuck in the ruts, trapped by your old life. Imprisoned by old mistakes. Yet Christ tells you that the truth sets you free. **“9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. 11 And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”**

These words are for you. At your Baptism, you had those words spoken to you by God Himself. You became God's Son, in every way that matters, and with you He is well pleased. You. He is pleased with you. You're a screwup, a mess, an accreted shipwreck of conflicting desires, most of them self-centered. Why? Because He made you something more. He made you His son. If you're like me and you seek a new beginning that you can see, a new beginning that makes sense to you. If you seek a new beginning for your life, our country, your faith maybe, or if you just want this darn plague to end so we can have a new beginning for our church or your family, I urge you to remember passages like this. I urge you to remember the promises that God gave you at your Baptism. You are always new in His sight. You are always loved in His sight. Your sins are always forgiven in His sight. You are never forsaken or forgotten in His sight. God is a masterclass at making

things new. He made you new hearts, new minds, even new bodies, and that is no small feat. God will make us new again. And again. It is what He is best at.

Amen.