

Baptism of our Lord-January 7, 2024

Themes for the Day

Christians in the West begin the season of Epiphany with the Magi's pilgrimage to meet the child Jesus. Christians in the East, perhaps taking their cue from Mark's Gospel begin Epiphany with the baptism of Jesus. If we sit with some of the words from today's Gospel reading we might find there is something that is all at once inspiring, disturbing, powerful, and hopeful.

Mark 1:4-13

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."

12-13 And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Sermon

Nothing tame about Jesus' baptism as Mark's Gospel, the oldest of the four Gospels, recounts it. Imagine Jesus plunged into baptismal waters and

think back to the Genesis reading where God's Spirit blows back against the chaotic watery tempest—and in the midst of chaos, God creates.

As Jesus comes up from baptismal waters...memories linger of waters that the ancients believed harboured evil spirits. People knew the seas were potentially deadly when storms sank boats and drowned fishers and sailors.

As John hauls Jesus up from the Jordan River, God rips open the heavens...a realm imagined in Genesis as a dome separating earth from the heavens and from an unknown cosmos where God was thought to dwell. In this baptizing moment, God rips apart anything dividing God from humanity or heaven from earth. God would shred the heavens again when Jesus is transfigured and yet again when he's crucified.

In what Celtic people would call a 'thin space' between earth and heaven, God's Spirit descends. The Working Preacher podcasters suggest that the Spirit's descent was more like a dive bombing than a gentle alighting—and they might be right when you hear that the very same Spirit propels Jesus into the dangerous, desolate desert.

Heavens ripped and God's voice speaks to Jesus—announcing that he is the beloved Son in whom God is most pleased.

Jesus embodies God's commitment to humanity and to all creation; God has not given up but doubles down on that commitment as Jesus emerges from the wilderness to heal, to forgive and as he himself says— not to be served but to serve.

Divine disruption creates, generates, and re affirms life. Divine disruption can be bad news for those who believe that creation's gifts and other humans are meant for their own use. Divine disruption might even knock the faithful off centre because it demands much of us.

Yet...the Gospel truth of it all is that nothing separates us from God's love and that in the end, love wins.

Jesus is baptized into God's fulfillment of ancient promises and primordial dreams and hopes. We who are baptized into Christ, are baptized into a similar destiny.

We might think that a new calendar year and the packing away of decorations means back to business as usual. Not so fast...let's hear the poetry from the Rev. Howard Thurman who tells us the work of Christmas (and I might add our baptism)has only just begun:

The work of Christmas begins
When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.

-from Christmas poems by the Rev. Howard Thurman