A.M.D.G. 1st Sunday After Epiphany – B Text: Mark 1: 1-11

January 11th, 2015

***Mark 1: 1-11*** *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.  As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” ’, John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’*

**Beloved And Beautiful To Behold**

 My favorite scene in the movie ***Finding Nemo*** takes place at the very end, after the credits begin to roll. The heart of the story is already over. After a harrowing journey across the sea, Marlin, the father clownfish, has been reunited with his son, Nemo, who had been taken from his home on the Great Barrier Reef and ended up in the fish tank of a Sydney dentist. And they all lived happily ever after. The end. Well - not quite. For, although the main story has ended, we soon discover that another story has just begun. You see, the fish who had helped Nemo escape from the tank had managed to free themselves, too. While their tank is being cleaned, they manage to roll the plastic bags they're in along the counter, out the window, across the street, and into Sydney Harbor. When the last one finally reaches the water, there is a collective cheer and sigh of relief. And then the reality of their situation dawns upon them. Bobbing in the ocean, still encased in a thin layer of plastic, Bloat, the puffer fish, breaks the silence with the words: "*Now what?*"

 Now what? That is the question on my mind today. The great drama of Advent is over. After their own harrowing journey to the manger, Mary and Joseph have welcomed their son into the world. The heavenly host has sung, the shepherds have gone to Bethlehem and seen their Messiah in the manger. The Magi have followed the star, paid their respects, left their gifts, and gone home by another way. That's good stuff. Great stuff, actually! In fact, it doesn't get much better than that. And therein lies the challenge on this second Sunday in January. Now what? What good news is there left to be said today, on the other side of Christmas?

 It's at about this time every year that we all realize something; something that the holidays let us tuck under the tree for a few weeks. We realize that, for all of the Christmas fuss, we're still waiting.

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After all of the carols have been sung, all of the presents given, all of the glorious promises read, for all of the magic of the season, we're still waiting for Jesus - still waiting for his kingdom to come - still waiting for his Church to thrive - still waiting for his will to be done in the parched landscape of our souls and our world. Here, on the other side of Christmas, we find ourselves living in the same old world with the same old people and struggling with the same old demons as always. On the other side of Christmas we can't help but wonder: "*Now what*?" In the words of professor Jasper Keith, at this time in the church calendar - we are living "*on the threshold between the numinous and the mundane*." We are living somewhere between the holidays and the routine days. And if it seems that we have been here before, we have -- just five weeks ago.

 Today's Gospel reading actually begins in the very same place of the very same Gospel as the one we heard in Advent. Only five weeks later and we find ourselves right back where we started. It's as if Christmas never came after all. And if we're honest with ourselves, that feels about right, doesn’t it?! Before we know it, we're back in the wilderness with John the Baptizer. Before we know it, we're back in line waiting for what John offers: forgiveness for our sins and a thorough dunking in the grace of God. And, yet - even as we're going under again - we know that sooner or later we'll be right back here holding our breath for a miracle. After all, that is the way it has always been. That is the way ***we*** have always been. Why should we expect it to be any different this time around? And then Mark gives us our answer. For although the Advent reading and the one today are similar, they are not the same. In Advent, the Gospel reading ends with us. But here, on the other side of Christmas, Mark keeps going. Just when it seems that the story is over and the credits are beginning to roll - just when it seems that we will never get out of the wilderness- never get away from John, never get away from ourselves - Mark continues: *"In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"*

 "*Now what*?" we ask. *"Now* ***Jesus****!"* says Mark.

 A mother was at home with her two young daughters one lazy afternoon. Everything seemed to be just fine until the mother realized something strange. The house was quiet. And as every parent knows, a quiet house in the daytime can only mean one thing: the kids are up to no good. Quietly walking into each of the girls' rooms and not finding them there, she began to get worried. Then she heard it: the sound of whispering followed by the flushing of a toilet. Following the sound, she soon realized where it was coming from. It was coming from her bathroom. Whispers, flush. Whispers, flush. Whispers, flush. Poking her head into the room, she was able to see both of her daughters standing over the toilet. Whispers, flush. One of them was holding a dripping Barbie doll by the ankles and the other one had her finger on the handle. Whispers, flush.

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Wanting to hear what her daughter was saying, she slipped quietly into the room. Whispers, flush. And this is what she heard: *"I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and into the hole you go."* Flush. Barbie was getting baptized!

 This is a true story. But maybe you already knew that. This is a true story because it's your story - it's my story - it's our story. We know it's true because we know what it feels like to have life grab us by the ankles and dangle us over the waters of chaos. And we know that this happens in spite of our faith. We even know that, at times, it happens precisely ***because*** of our faith.

 Don't believe me? All you have to do is look at Jesus. What was the first thing that happened to him after his baptism? The Spirit whisked him away to be tempted by the devil. Into the hole you go! That's why I think Mark tells the story of Jesus' baptism the way he does - as an intimate encounter between himself and God and not a spectacle for everyone to see and hear – as it’s told in the other gospels. I think Mark tells it this way because he wants us to know what it meant to *Jesus* before we try to figure out what it means for us.

 So what *did* it mean for Jesus? It didn't mean that God would keep him out of trouble. He found *that* out even before he had a chance to dry off! It didn't even mean that things would work out just the way he had planned. No, it seems to me that what Jesus' baptism meant to him was that when he found himself in trouble, he wouldn't find himself alone. It meant that even when things didn't go his way, he would still have the Spirit's company. And it meant that he carried with him always the blessing of God - *beloved*. **Beloved,** the voice from heaven proclaimed as the baptismal waters of the Jordan rolled off Jesus’ body. **Beloved,** the voice named him as he prepared to begin his public ministry. **Beloved,** spoken with such power that it would permeate Jesus’ entire life and teaching. **Beloved,** he would name those he met who were desperate for healing, for inclusion, for hope. **Beloved,** echoing through the ages, continuing to name those drenched in the waters of baptism. **Beloved.  Child of God.**

 At a preaching conference I attended several years ago, I heard a story told by Janet Wolf, a minister in the United Methodist Church in the US, who serves a wildly diverse congregation. It includes, as Janet describes it, “…*people with power and PhDs and folks who have never gone past the third grade; folks with two houses and folks living on the streets; and, as one person who struggles with mental health declared, ‘those of us who are crazy and those who think they’re not.’”*  Years ago, a woman named Fayette found her way to the church where Janet Wolf ministers. Fayette lived with mental illness and lupus and without a home. She joined the new member class. The conversation about baptism—“*this holy moment when we are named by God’s grace with such power it won’t come undone,*” as Janet puts it—especially grabbed Fayette’s imagination. Janet tells of how, during the class, Fayette would ask again and again, “*And when I’m baptized, I am…?” “And the class,*” Janet writes, *“learned to respond, ‘Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.’ ‘Oh, yes!’* she’d say, and then we could go back to our discussion.”

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The day of Fayette’s baptism came – and this is how Janet describes it: Fayette went under, came up spluttering, and cried, ‘*And now I am*…?’ And we all sang, ‘*Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.’ ‘Oh, yes!*’ she shouted as she danced all around the fellowship hall.

 Two months later, Janet received a phone call. Fayette had been beaten and raped and was at the county hospital. So I went, Janet told us. She said, “I could see her from a distance, pacing back and forth. And when I got to the door, I heard, ‘*I am beloved*….’ She turned, saw me, and said, ‘*I am beloved, precious child of God, and*….’ Then - catching sight of herself in the mirror—hair sticking up, blood and tears streaking her face - dress torn, dirty, and rebuttoned askew - she started again, *‘I am beloved, precious child of God, and*…’ She looked in the mirror again and declared, ‘…*and God is still working on me. If you come back tomorrow, I’ll be so beautiful I’ll take your breath away!’*

 The story of Fayette—beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold— still haunts me, blesses me, and goes with me into this season. She challenges me to ask what it means that—like her - I have been named in baptism by God’s grace with such power that it won’t come undone – no matter what! Baptism promises us that we are not alone in the wilderness. It tells us that God's love for us doesn't depend upon us. It assures us that God's grace doesn't wash off. Baptism means that whenever we find ourselves in a hole, we can be sure that in the hole God goes with us. The question for us now – on this side of Christmas - is how will we live in such a way that others will know this - know themselves as named by God, beloved by God—especially those who have been given cause to think they are less than loved - less than children of the One who created them?

 In the coming days, may the waters of our baptism so cling to us that in their depths we see who we are - and by what we say and do reflect back to ourselves and others our true name: beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.

Amen. May it be so. May it be so.