

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
January 14, 2018  
Epiphany 1/Baptism of Our Lord

Isaiah 42:1-9  
Psalm 89:20-29  
Acts 10:34-38  
Mark 1:7-11

After having come through Advent and the preparation for Jesus' birth; and after celebrating his birth through the Christmas season and into Epiphany and the visit of the Magi, the cycle of liturgical time does a sort of "fast forward" to the point where today we see Jesus' going out into the wilderness to be baptized by John in the Jordan River.

Mark uses some interesting language here to describe what happens, and in doing so connects us back to when we were in the Advent season.

On the first Sunday of Advent we read from the prophet Isaiah, who wrote these words:

*Oh, that you [God] would burst from the heavens and come down!  
How the mountains would quake in your presence! As fire causes wood to burn  
and water to boil, your coming would make the nations tremble. Then your  
enemies would learn the reason for your fame! (Is. 64:1-2)*

We talked a bit on that day about how we all share that longing for God *literally* to come down to this broken-down world and put things right. We long for God to show up on the scene, to "throw His weight around," to bring justice to those who

suffer, to tumble the high and mighty from their thrones, and to exalt those of low estate.

Indeed, we long for this, do we not? Is this not still the cry of our hearts?

Notice how Mark describes what happens here as Jesus is baptized by John:

*As Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the **heavens splitting apart** and the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice from heaven said, “You are my beloved Son, and you bring me great joy.”* (Mark 1:10-11)

Mark clearly has Isaiah’s words in mind as he writes this, and in using Isaiah’s imagery he wants to make it clear that what is happening to Jesus here is an earth-shattering event. Jesus is being empowered by the very presence and power of God. Wherever he goes and whatever he does, the power of God rests upon Jesus.

In another sense I think Mark is also saying that what happens here as John baptizes Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s longing. *God has indeed come down. The heavens have indeed been torn open. Justice and freedom – so long awaited – have arrived.*

God has indeed come to “throw His weight” around. But he has done so in this man born of a lowly teenage girl from Nazareth, a man...

...who defies conventional expectations

...who will eat with sinners and tax collectors

...who will restore dignity to those on the margins, especially women

... who weeps at being rejected

...who has the power over all life but who in the end willingly surrenders his own life to death as a way of wielding power.

Isaiah – and Mark – were right. The heavens have indeed been torn open. God has thrown His weight around. But it has happened in the quietest, simplest, most unobtrusive way. For that's how love works. Love doesn't force its way in, it does not run roughshod, it does not force us to love in return. Jesus' baptism *is* earth-shattering. But your heart has to be tuned to the vibrations and the shaking.

Mark then describes the descent of the Holy Spirit on Jesus "like a dove." I've often wondered why the image of a dove is used to describe what is happening here. But then I remembered an occasion in the Old Testament where a dove was featured. Do you remember?

In Genesis 8, after the flood waters had receded, Noah released a dove to see if the waters had receded enough for the dove to find dry ground. Eventually, the dove returns to Noah carrying an olive branch in its mouth.

As I wondered if there might be any connection between the dove in Genesis and the descent of the Spirit like a dove here at Jesus' baptism, I discovered that many of the early church fathers indeed made such a connection.

Tertullian, for example, said: "After the flood, by which the iniquity of the old world was cleansed away, e.g., after the baptism of the world, the dove proclaimed to the earth the tempering of the wrath of heaven."

Tertullian and the other church fathers helped me to see something much larger going on here than I previously saw in this episode. The image of the dove here not only calls to mind Noah and the Flood, but sees in Jesus the “new” Noah, who comes to build a new Ark (the Church), and to bring people safely into the Ark through the cleansing of their sins and their reconciliation to the Father. What’s happening here in the Jordan River is not merely that Jesus is being baptized, but that in his baptism Jesus is making *new* the *old* creation.” He is the new Noah.

As we come to the Table this morning, we are reminded that it is through our own baptisms that we are made partakers of this reality. Through our baptisms we are brought into the Ark of the Church and given a share in Jesus’ work. And it is here at the Table where we are fed with supernatural food that strengthens us to fulfill the work he gives us to do.

So come with faith. And give thanks.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.