

Now What?

Mark 1:4-11

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
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I

At the very end of the wonderful Disney/Pixar animated movie *Finding Nemo*,
after the credits have begun to roll,
the fish who helped Nemo escape from the dentist's tank to be
reunited with his father
have also made good their escape.

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 the harbor.

When the last one finally reaches the water, there is a collective cheer and a sigh of
relief.

And then the reality of their situation dawns upon them.

Bobbing on the surface of the harbor,
still encased in plastic bags,
Bloat, the puffer fish, breaks the silence with the words:
"Now what?"

II

Now what?

That is the question on our minds today.

The great drama of Christmas is over.

Mary and Joseph have welcomed their son into the world.

The heavenly host sang of good news of great joy for all people
and then returned to heaven,

The shepherds witnessed the Messiah in the manger
and then returned to their sheep.

The Magi followed the star to Bethlehem,
paid their respects,
offered their gifts,
and then returned home by another way.

It's great stuff for preaching—in fact, it doesn't get much better than that.

But then comes the challenge faced by every single preacher in Christendom on
this second Sunday in January.

Now what?

What good news is there left to be said today,
on the other side of Christmas?

And it's not just we preachers who are in a pickle.

It's about this time every year when we all realize something—
even with all of the Christmas fuss,
we're still waiting.

After all the carols have been sung,
all the presents opened,
all the glorious promises read,
after all of the magic of the season,
we are 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.

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?"

Even our liturgical calendar seems confused by this.

On the one hand, today is the Baptism of the Lord and the liturgical color is still white, the color of Christmastide.

And yet, this Sunday is also the first day of what is called "Ordinary Time"—when we begin the countdown to Lent, just five and a half weeks from now.

It is further evidence that we are living,
in the words of one theologian,
"on the threshold between the numinous and the mundane."

We are living somewhere between the ordinary days and the holy days.

And if it seems that we have been here before,
we have—just five weeks ago.

III

Today's Gospel reading actually begins in the very same place of the very same Gospel as the one assigned for the Second Sunday of Advent.

That was on December 7, and now five weeks later we find ourselves right back where we started.

It's as if Christmas never came at all.

And if we're honest with ourselves, that feels about right.

Before we know it, we are back in the wilderness.

Before we know it, we are 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 will be right back here holding our breath for a miracle.

After all, this 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?

Then Mark gives us our answer.

For although these two readings are similar, they are not the same.

On the Second Sunday of Advent, the Gospel reading ends with John's baptism.

It ends with us shivering in the wilderness with nothing between us and God except John and the Jordan,
 and John pointing us to the One who will come to baptize us in his Holy Spirit.

But here, on the other side of Christmas, Mark continues.

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,
 here, for the first time in Mark, comes Jesus:

"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.

V

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus' baptism is a moment of almost incomprehensible drama.

The creation of the earth foreshadows and is fulfilled by the new creation of the gospel.

How different the place of baptism in our churches is.

Infant baptism is sometimes little more than a fulfillment of cultural expectations:

send birth announcements,
furnish the nursery,
get the baby baptized.

And "believer's" baptism may simply fulfill a set of cultural assumptions centered on adolescence rather than infancy:

join the scouts,
have your first date,
get baptized.

The challenge for us is to see how our baptisms connect to Jesus' experience of baptism.

Jesus rises from the waters of the Jordan and sees "the heavens torn apart."

The Greek verb for "torn" is the same word used in Mark 15:38 of the curtain of the temple torn from top to bottom at the moment of Jesus' death.

The curtain between heaven and earth is thrown back,
and Jesus receives the affirmation of his ministry as God's Son.

The Spirit descends in the form of a dove—
a symbol of gentleness and peace.

The voice of God speaks: "*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well-pleased.*"

Students of Mark's gospel have long pointed out how the voice from heaven combines two texts that tell us what kind of ministry Jesus will have.

"You are my son," comes from Psalm 2:7, a coronation psalm. Jesus is announced as the king who will establish his reign on earth.

“With you I am well pleased” comes from Isaiah 42:1, the song of the suffering servant.

Jesus is a king who will establish his reign on earth not through political machinations or military might,
but through the power of suffering love.

As Mark describes it, this is the pivotal moment that launches Jesus into his ministry of teaching and healing.

In the musical “Jekyll and Hyde,” Jekyll sings:

*This is the moment!
This is the day,
When I send all my doubts and demons
On their way!*

*This is the moment,
This is the time,
When the momentum and the moment
Are in rhyme!*

*Give me this moment -
This precious chance -
I'll gather up my past
And make some sense at last!*

This is Jesus’ moment,
and notice also that it is a Trinitarian moment.

As Jesus rises from the waters of the Jordan,
the Spirit descends in the form of a dove,
and the voice of the Father speaks from heaven.

All creation is caught up in this great expression of love.

The Advent prayer of Isaiah 64:1 that God would “tear open the heavens and come down” is answered.

Commissioned by God’s voice

empowered by God's Spirit,
this is Jesus' moment,
the inauguration of the new age of the Kingdom.

His baptism sets the stage for everything that follows in his ministry.

In the words of Karl Barth, God wills not to remain hidden in the heights of heaven but descends to the depths of earthly life in order to be seen and heard by us finite creatures.

“What now?” we ask.

“Now Jesus,” is the Epiphany answer.

IV

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—too quiet

Every parent knows that 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 that it was coming from her bathroom. Whispers, flush. Whispers, flush.

Poking her head into the room, she was able to see both of her daughters standing over the commode.

One of them was holding a dripping Barbie doll by the ankles and the other one had her finger on the handle. Whispers, flush.

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 in the hole you go." Flush.

This story rings true for us because we all know there are times when life grab us by the ankles and dangle us over the waters of chaos.

We all know that this happens in spite of our faith.

We also 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 is the first thing that happens to him after his baptism?

Mark says the Spirit drove him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

In the hole you go!

V

That is 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.

Mark tells it this way because he wants us to understand 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 the Father 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 Father's blessing and the Spirit's company.

And isn't that what his baptism means to us too?

Unlike John's baptism, Jesus' baptism means that we are not alone in the wilderness.

It means that God's love for us doesn't depend upon us.

It means that God's grace doesn't wash off.

In Marilynne Robinson's new novel "Lila," a young woman is baptized by the elderly Rev. John Ames and later she becomes his wife and gives birth to his son.

("Lila" is the story told from her perspective, while the story is told from Rev. Ames' perspective in the first of the three "Gilead" novels.)

But at one point when Lila is not sure about her relationship with God or with Rev. Ames, she goes to the river and tries to wash off the baptism.

After they are married Rev. Ames assures her that she cannot wash off the effects of baptism,
 and neither can we.

The baptism of Jesus means that whenever we find ourselves in a hole,
 we can be sure that **in the hole he goes too.**

Whenever Martin Luther found himself ready to give up,
 whenever worry for his own life and the life of the Church he loved overwhelmed him,
 it is said that he would touch his forehead and say to himself:
 "Remember Martin, you have been baptized."

Here on the other side of Christmas,
 that's not only good advice,
 that's good news!

VI

As we cross this threshold between the mundane and the numinous,
between the ordinary days and the holy days,
between the world we live in and the world we hope for,
let us also touch our foreheads and remember that we have been baptized.

And on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday,
let us also remember that Jesus was baptized too.

He was baptized with us.

He was baptized for us.

May the comfort that it gave him through all of his trials give us even greater
comfort through ours,
those baptized in the name of the Father,
and of the Son,
and in the hole he goes.

Now what?

Now Jesus!

Amen.

Sources:

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