



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Epiphany 1 (B)

#### Beginnings

[RCL] Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

Each of the four Gospels begins in their own unique manner. Matthew, for example, embarks from the very first verse on a lengthy genealogy of Jesus, tracing his Jewish lineage all the way back to Abraham. Luke, by contrast, begins with an introduction that reads like part memoir and part history textbook. John, for his part, utilizes poetry to introduce theological themes that continue throughout his Gospel.

But Mark is in a category unto himself. He never offers a genealogy of Jesus at all, never claims to be writing history, and moves at such a breakneck pace that there is little time for theology and certainly no time for poetry. Instead, Mark jumps right into the fray and opens on the banks of the river Jordan, as Jesus is baptized.

Given that today is the first Sunday after the Epiphany, and thus the first Sunday since November that our churches are not adorned with Advent wreaths and crèches, this is also the *de facto* beginning of our yearlong reading of the Gospel of Mark. And although the lectionary begins in the fourth verse of the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark, it bears pointing out that the first three verses of the chapter lend important clues about just what kind of Gospel Mark is writing, and how best readers ancient and modern should read it.

For starters, it is no accident that Mark's Gospel doesn't make it past the first two sentences without quoting the Hebrew Bible—in particular, Isaiah. Mark, not unlike Jesus himself, knew the Jewish scriptures well and quoted them often. He narrates the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, not as a new story about God and God's people, but rather as a pivotal moment in the larger story of God making Godself known in human history. The God we meet in Jesus, Mark tells us, is the same God spoken of in the Hebrew scriptures, who is doing a new thing.

The second thing these omitted introductory verses point out is that this Gospel that Mark has written—literally “good news”—is not all that can or should be said of Jesus of Nazareth. Rather, Mark makes clear from the first words of his Gospel that this is, “The *beginning* of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

Mark makes these two important points just prior to launching into the story of baptism because it turns out that baptism works in much the same way. In baptism, we don't stop being who we are or get to ignore the history that inevitably and fundamentally shapes us. Just as Jesus doesn't stop being Mary's boy from Bethlehem, incarnate from the God we first met in the Hebrew scriptures, so too are we all someone from somewhere—for better or worse.

When we come to the waters of baptism, we bring all of that with us—all of our humanity; all of the ways in which our families of origin and experiences have made us who we are—the good, the bad, and the ugly!

In other words, our identities can't be centered purely in introspection and individualism. They must also be rooted in our communities and contexts as well. In order to know ourselves, we have to know each other.

And in the same way that Mark's Gospel is the beginning rather than the sum total of all that can be said of Jesus, so too baptism isn't a sacramental participation trophy to be displayed in a lighted and locked cabinet. Baptism is the beginning of our life in covenantal relationship with the living God, made known to us in Jesus Christ.

The baptized life is not a career that we can pursue part-time, or one day retire from. It is a vocation meant to be lived out with every fiber of our being. That's why it's so important that we renew our baptismal vows over and over again, and share in the feast of Christ's body and blood over and over again, and read and study Scripture over and over again—because we human beings are forgetful people!

An essential part of the Christian vocation is reminding one another who and whose we are. We do that by extending and receiving grace and mercy, by opening ourselves up to vulnerability, and ultimately by telling the story of the God we meet in Jesus—a story that continues unto the fullness of time.

In Mark's Gospel alone, the word “immediately” appears 42 times—three times more often than in the rest of the New Testament and seven times more often than in the entire Old Testament. It is as if Mark's style of writing is a sermon in itself: Just as the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection moves at a breakneck pace, so too does the life of the baptized! The work is urgent!

That's why when Jesus is baptized, Mark wants us to feel the water and smell the breeze and see the spectacle! That's why, when he describes the heavens opening, he says they were torn apart—*schizomenous* is the word in Greek. It shares the same root as the word Schizophrenia—a visceral and

violent disruption in the *status quo*. God's voice disrupts the *status quo*, declaring Jesus to be God's own Beloved!

If we want life to remain exactly as it is, and if we want to stay exactly where we are, doing exactly what we're doing, perhaps we should re-think baptism and the Christian life.

But if, on the other hand, we desire a life dedicated to following the living God, as we work together to build God's kingdom, then the place to start is at the water's edge.

From there, find a good pair of shoes and a sturdy walking stick because the journey has just begun, and the work of the Kingdom is far too urgent to wait. Amen.

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