

Mark 1:4-11

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."

Have you ever seen the movie, “Finding Nemo”? Well, my favorite scene in this movie takes place at the very end, after the credits have already begun to roll. The heart of the story is already over. After a scary 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. Most people who saw this in the theatres probably were already leaving their seats, or if you watch this at home, you probably were already turning it off.

For, although the main story has ended, we soon discover that another story has just begun.

You see, the fish who 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 the 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 that is on my mind today. The great drama of Advent is over. After their own harrowing and scary 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. Simeon and Anna have rejoiced that they lived to see the light of the Gentiles and the glory of Israel revealed in the temple. The Magi have followed the star, paid their respects, left their gifts, and gone home by another road.

Wow! That’s good stuff. Great stuff, actually. In fact, it doesn’t get much better than that. And therein lies the challenge of every good preacher in Christianity on this second Sunday of January. Now what? What good news is there left to be said today, on the other side of Christmas?

But I don’t think it is just we preachers who are in a quandary asking, now what? I think it’s 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. After all 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 the Church to thrive. . still waiting for his will to be done in the dry and arid places of our weary 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?”

Look at our church calendar, there is even struggle there and wonderment. The liturgical color for today is white; the color of Christmastide, but this Sunday is also the day we return to what is called, “ordinary time”. This shows even brighter that we are living between the spiritual and the mundane. We are living somewhere between the holidays and the every 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 that we heard just five weeks ago on the second Sunday of Advent. And here we are, just 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, right now.

Before we know it, we're right back in the wilderness. Before we know it, we're right 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?

Be careful for what we ask for, for as soon as the question leaves our mouths, here comes Mark with an answer. Yes, the reading for second Sunday of Advent and the one we have today are similar, they are also different. 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. But here, on the other side of Christmas, just when we begin to think as if Christmas never happened, just as the credits are beginning to roll, just when it seems we will never get out of the wilderness, never get away from John, never get away from ourselves, Mark's Gospel 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.

Did Jesus look up at the sky before he went under the water? The narrator doesn't say, but when Jesus came up out of the water, wet from the Jordan, he did look up, and he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.

There's no indication that others saw this--only Jesus. He saw the heavens torn apart, not opened as in Matthew or Luke, but torn apart. The Greek word there is a form of the verb *schitzo* as in schism or schizophrenia. It is not the same word as open. I open the door. I close the door. The door looks the same, but something torn apart is not easily closed again. The ragged edges never go back together as they were. Mark wasn't careless in using that word: *schitzo*. He remembered Isaiah's plea centuries before when the prophet cried out to God, "Oh, that you would tear the heavens open and come down to make your name known to your enemies and make the nations tremble at your presence."

Now Jesus stood in the Jordan, dripping wet, without a hint that anyone else saw the heavens torn apart or saw the dove or heard the voice. And there wasn't a clue that the nations were trembling. But that did not mean that nothing had changed. Though we usually imagine God speaking in a booming voice, resonant and deep, that voice is more often heard in movies than in Scripture. God's voice can be a whisper, a breath, quiet as the still small voice that reached Elijah hiding in his cave.

At the Jordan the voice that came from heaven spoke to Jesus alone. It was intimate, direct. "You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased. In you my Spirit will be present on the earth in a new way." The heavens were torn apart, and they would never close again.

But the torn place is where God comes through, the place that never again closes as neatly as before. From the day he saw the heavens torn apart, Jesus began tearing apart the pictures of whom Messiah was supposed to be--

Tearing apart the social fabric that separated rich from poor.
Breaking through hardness of heart to bring forth compassion.
Breaking through rituals that had grown rigid or routine.
Tearing apart the chains that bound some in the demon's power.
Tearing apart the notions of what it means to be God's Beloved Son.

Nothing would ever be the same, for the heavens would never again close so tightly.

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 commode. 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. 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 is a true story. But you already knew that, didn't you? You knew this was 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. In the hole you go!

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

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 sounds like good advice. That sounds like good news.

As we cross this threshold between the spiritual and the mundane, the holidays and the every days, the world we hope for and the world we live in, 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. And 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 let us pray...

Gracious God, we thank you for this story on the other side of Christmas. We thank you for the Spirit's landing and your blessing upon Jesus at his baptism. We thank you for the same in ours. And we thank you for giving us Jesus, the baptized Savior, who shows us that whatever hole we may find ourselves in, in the hole he goes. Help us to remember that we have been baptized. Help us to remember that your grace doesn't wash off. Amen