

Sunday, January 7, 2018 – First Sunday in Ordinary Time

Preacher: Douglas J. Brouwer

Scripture: Genesis 1:1-5 and Mark 1:4-11

Sermon title: “Where it all started”

Note: This Sunday is also known on the church calendar as “Baptism of the Lord,” and that’s important to know because the scripture readings (especially the gospel reading) point to Jesus’ baptism and the beginning of God’s work in the world.

If you have the time and inclination, reading the creation story all the way through to Genesis 2:3 would be interesting to do. It’s one of those stories that reminds us each time we read it of God’s impressive design for creation itself.

For Sunday we will focus on Mark’s story of John’s baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River, which (for Mark) is also the beginning of God’s work in the world. As I mentioned in an Advent sermon last month, the other gospel writers start their stories in far different ways. Matthew and Luke begin with far more conventional birth stories. John begins theologically with “in the beginning was the LOGOS,” a word probably best left untranslated. Only Mark begins without a proper introduction. With only 16 chapters to his gospel, it’s as though he doesn’t have time for cute babies and worried parents. He gets down to business (that’s a good English idiom) in a hurry!

1. For an interesting first question, you might want to reflect for a few minutes on how you might tell the story, if God led you to write a gospel. Remember that the literary genre known as “gospel” is new, and there are no rules. A gospel is not a biography, and the four canonical gospels are certainly not biographies of Jesus, as we have come to know that genre. (They are also not histories, as we understand that genre.) Instead, the four gospels are written to persuade, to make an argument, to bring the reader to a decision – like the Roman soldier at the cross who says, “Truly, this man was God’s son!” Where would you begin to tell the story of Jesus’ life, ministry, teachings, death, and resurrection? (Of note at this point is that Mark’s gospel includes no resurrection appearances of Jesus. Perhaps the point is that Easter has not occurred until Jesus has become real to each of us.)
2. Now that you have thought (a little) about how you might tell the story (keeping your intended audience in mind is always a good idea), please reflect on how Mark decides to start his gospel. Without a baby (and apparently not counting on a patient reader), Mark launches into his story by mentioning John the Baptist. John was apparently well known to first century Jews, and it was important for Mark not only to mention him, but also to make a clear distinction between John’s mission and Jesus’ – “...one who is more powerful than is coming after me.” Think back to the situation in the first century and ask yourself, “Would there possibly be some confusion between Jesus and John? How were the two different?”
3. We sometimes think of the baptism of infants as touching, cute, adorable, or whatever adjective you want to insert here. The point is, we love seeing

parents up front, holding their baby, and we look forward to unexpected cries and squirming and so on. Don't get me wrong, I like all of that too. What we usually don't think about, however, is the more historic meaning of baptism with all of its political and spiritual implications. What did it mean for Jews to go out to the Jordan River to be baptized by John? What did it mean for Jesus to find himself one day among all of these people? What was Jesus attempting to do (and why is it important for Mark to place this incident at the very beginning of the gospel)?

4. I would be remiss if I failed to point out what occurs "immediately" after the baptism. Jesus, as you will see, is "driven" by the Spirit into the wilderness to contend with "wild beasts." In some ways, we are seeing here a creation story. Just as Adam and Eve had an opportunity to live in perfect harmony with the Spirit of God, so Jesus begins his work with God's blessing. And almost as soon as this blessed harmony begins, so does the temptation. Jesus, unlike Adam, is able to withstand the evil that exists in the world, and he goes on to live and die in ways that we are not. Here is the comparison intended by placing Genesis 1 and Mark 1 side by side. And to circle back to one of my earlier questions (why Mark wrote his story in this way), you can begin to see how Mark's Jewish readers might have read this beginning. With Jesus, what was started in Genesis begins again.

Here's a little bonus material from my friend Scott Hoezee, a teacher of preachers in the U.S., concerning one of Mark's literary quirks...

The Year B Revised Common Lectionary will spend a lot of time in Mark's gospel, and so as we begin this new Lectionary year it is well to focus on some of Mark's key characteristics, starting in Mark 1 with the first occurrences of Mark's #1 favorite Greek word: *euthus*. The force of this word is "immediately," though sometimes Bible translations blandly bury the word under some boring-sounding phrase like "then" or, as in Mark 1:10, obscure the word from sight altogether by translating it "As . . ." as in "As Jesus came up out of the water . . ." But in the Greek Mark really is saying, "**Immediately** upon coming out of the water, Jesus saw the heavens torn." And then not two verses later we are told in verse 12 that with equally lightning quick speed the Holy Spirit "**Immediately** hurled Jesus out into the desert." Things happen fast in Mark's narrative style but something of the very verve and vitality of the gospel is in there, too! We don't want to miss it!