

It is a new beginning for Jesus. Or at least it is the beginning that matters most to the writer of Mark. For the Gospel of Mark, we do not have any birth narrative, no story of Jesus being born, of visitors in Bethlehem. No, the Gospel of Mark begins, a few verses before the ones we just heard, with the opening line, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God.” Mark introduces Jesus saying, “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.” Mark begins with the baptism of Christ because this is the moment that begins Jesus’ ministry, and this is what is most important to the writer of Mark.

A new beginning – Jesus hears the voice of God, the same voice that speaks creation into being, the same voice of the Lord that the Psalmist writes of. When God speaks things happen! Mark tells us the voice of God proclaims Jesus is the Son of God, the Beloved, the one with whom God is well pleased. In this epiphany, Jesus experiences it all – he sees the heavens torn apart, the Spirit descends like a dove and God speaks. It’s a new beginning like the beginning of God’s creation. And here is a new age, when God speaks and the Spirit is present. The Spirit is present. No newborn baby, no kings...no ‘Away in the Manger’...instead Jesus is baptized and begins his ministry.

God is still speaking and the Spirit is still present. This is what we are celebrating in this story today. This is what we celebrate in Holy Baptism. We are baptized into the baptism of Christ. We share with Christ in his baptism. It is the beginning that God gives to us. It is when we join in the mission and ministry of Christ...when we begin ministering in the Name of Christ. This is why today is one of the special days that our Church sets aside for baptisms (though not today). And it makes today a fitting day to honor and commission our acolytes who are ministers serving God. Indeed we celebrate and recognize that God is still speaking to us...and the Spirit is very much present with us. Whether we were baptized as infants, or later in life, or maybe you are still considering baptism – baptism recognizes what God has done and is doing in our lives, making us one with Christ and giving us the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In Jesus’ baptism he hears God speaking telling him that he is God’s Beloved, the Son of God. We too are God’s beloved. God wants our ears to be open to hear this message that came to us in our baptism, and that we hear again today, renewing us – you are God’s beloved. God loves you and cares what happens to you. The Spirit of God is with you, in whatever might be happening in your life right now, the Spirit is present.

God is inviting us today, through the Holy Scriptures, to remember our own baptism, and to focus on how God is giving us new beginnings. In these Sundays after the Epiphany, of which today is the first, will give us stories of how Jesus comes to people, how he is revealed, made known, how people hear God speaking and how people experience the Spirit in their lives. This is the theme of our readings over the next eight weeks.

This presents us an opportunity to enter a time of praying and reflecting on our own experiences of what we hear God saying to us, of how the Spirit is guiding and leading us, of how God may be calling us into new beginning, calling us each personally, and calling us as the people of St. John’s.

Let’s consider the message of the Psalmist this morning. With majesty the Psalmist proclaims that God is greater and stronger than any form of chaos, and that implies God is greater than any idol or scheme we may use to control the chaos around us, or within us, for

that matter. God rules over the wilds of severe wind, water and storms. Fierce weather and natural disasters may recall for us how little control we have despite our obsession, as human beings, for control. The voice of the Lord is stronger than all that shakes the earth...mountains and trees....they all appear weak and wobbly in the presence of God's strength. The psalmist reminds us that the voice of the Lord is stronger still. "Surprisingly, after intense descriptions of God's power in and over storms, the simple request of the psalmist is that God would bless the people with strength and peace."<sup>i</sup>

Hear the words we read again, "The Lord shall give strength to his people, the Lord shall give his people the blessing of peace." I invite you to carry these words of prayer into your week – and see how God makes a new beginning that includes you! Strength and peace – God knows we need these gifts and blessings.

Let's consider again the words Jesus heard at his baptism. They are words of delight and love – "You are my Beloved with whom I am well pleased." It seems like the words are still reverberating when, immediately the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness where he faces a long difficult time of testing. And as the words reverberate, they seem to frame everything that follows. We can surely say that Love is both the first and last word about Jesus. Beloved is the beginning and the ending.

The word LOVE frames who we are as God's people also. Love frames how we hear God speaking to us and how we experience God's presence with us. God's love for us is the first and final word about us – about who we are and whose we are. But this love God has for us is not something tame or therapeutic. The scriptures hold us back from turning God's love into something meek and mild. God says to us through these scriptures and through our own baptisms, that God is speaking words of love to us, and the Spirit is still present with great power.

Maybe the real challenge for us – is to believe that we are God's beloved, to believe deep in our hearts that God cares enough for us to give us a new beginning, that God has hope for us. It is a gift God gives us. We do not earn God's love. We do not earn this new beginning. Like in baptism, and sharing the Bread of Christ and the Cup of Salvation – we do not earn these experiences, they are gifts, blessings from God, to sustain and nourish us – 'to give strength and the blessing of peace.'

"Many voices call out to us, demanding our attention and shaping our self-perceptions, life choices, interpretations of our past and understandings of our future. In the midst of all the noise and competing authorities, the voice of the Lord, a voice stronger than storms and mountains, breaks the heavens open to deliver a word of love. "Beloved" is God's word for us."<sup>ii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Christine D. Pohl, "Power and Delight" in *Living by the Word*, in *Christian Century*, January 10, 2006, page 20.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.