

Sermon for Epiphany 1 Year B

The Text: Mark 1:4-11

As everyone's been slowly getting back to work this week after the Christmas break, I've noticed there's still a few decorations hanging in different businesses around town. I guess you could say they're symbolic of that lingering sense of celebration and a longing for the joy of the season to keep going. Christmas is such a high point in our lives and in the life of the church, that anything that follows runs the risk of paling into insignificance. Who or what can compare to a baby in a manger, camels and wise men, shepherds and angels singing God's praises? The birth of our Lord Jesus captivates many people – even some people who aren't Christian. But I just about guarantee most don't give his baptism a second thought today.

By comparison with the story of Christmas today's text may seem a little dull. Here we encounter Jesus' wild cousin John once again. Preaching his fiery sermons and baptising people by the truck load. Into the midst of this crowd comes Jesus and without fanfare He too is baptised. No angelic chorus here. No gathering of wise men with gifts. Just Jesus with John, in the muddy Jordan River. Mark doesn't even record John's objection. This is an event that could've slipped past our attention without too much trouble – and yet here in Mark's gospel it's the very first thing we hear about Jesus – so it must be important. And while the crowds didn't hear or see it, the entire Trinity is revealed in this act – Father, Son and Holy Spirit kicking off Jesus' ministry – so again we're reminded that significant things are under way here.

Jesus' baptism is important because in it God continues to fulfil what He began at Christmas. When Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary He took on our flesh. God Himself came to dwell in our midst, to be with us and to live the life we face. And yet He was different. He was God and man – facing everything we do, we're told, and yet He was without sin. But in His baptism Jesus' place among us sinners was completely secured.

Let's remember that John was baptising people who came in repentance for their sins, seeking forgiveness from God. So immediately we should be asking why was Jesus baptised? What did He have to repent of? And the answer of course, is nothing. There was no sin of His own that needed forgiving. But as He was washed by John, Jesus took on the sin and guilt of the whole world. He allowed Himself to be counted among the sinners – becoming one with us and taking hold of our sin that He might carry it to the cross and grave. At His birth God was joined with our flesh and blood so that He could be with us. And in His baptism, Jesus voluntarily joins Himself to our sin so that He can overcome it.

Nothing outstanding caught the eyes of those looking on as Jesus climbed out of the water. His baptism looked the same as the multitude that had gone before. But as Mark records, this is an event of cosmic proportions. Jesus' baptism tears heaven wide open as God's long awaited salvation moves one step closer. The sin and guilt and shame that closed heaven to us sinners was being shifted onto the One who could bear it's load and defeat it's power. And so the wall of sin that cut us off from God is ripped apart as Jesus starts carrying the burden of our sin in a three year journey toward the cross.

We need to see the picture Mark is using here. This is no gentle opening of a doorway. The word Mark uses to describe what happens to the heavens is the same kind of word you'd use to describe the vicious tear that occurs when you hit a bit of red gum in just the right spot with a block splitter. This is a violent tearing apart of the barrier God had been waiting to destroy. And it all starts when Jesus accepts our sin as His own by being baptised.

Because Jesus so willingly goes into that river and receives a sinner's baptism this text is full of good news for us. But let's remember without His baptism this text would be anything but good news. John the Baptist preached the Law of God without compromise. Through him God revealed the hearts of every one of us and laid our sin out for all to see. His preaching drove even the most self righteous to their knees in repentance because it condemned their sin without chance of excuse. But when Jesus is baptised this proclamation no longer condemns those who have faith in Christ – instead it condemns Jesus in our place. It still exposes our sin but it lays it all on Jesus so that heaven can remain wide open to you and me. This simple, unremarkable looking event in the Jordan has guaranteed that for us.

Why do we need to hear this again this morning? Because as we look around us today there still seems to be nothing very remarkable happening in the world to assure us of God's presence and grace. Nothing to confirm that heaven is open to us. In fact the very opposite seems to be true. As you struggle with decreased income from careful retirement investments you might wonder why God allows such hardship to befall you. As you watch on as violence consumes different parts of the world again and again and children and civilians are killed, you might question God's goodness and power. As the sun heats up and drought feels like it's on our doorstep still, you could start to think God has forgotten about you. That He has closed up heaven and taken away His blessings.

But Jesus' baptism proclaims that this gaping hole in heaven is real. His baptism shows us the fullness of His love and grace as He becomes our scapegoat, as He deals with our sin and death, so that we can be certain of our standing before God regardless of what we face here and now. No matter what our feelings are telling us at any particular moment, the heavens are definitely open, declares the baptism of our Lord. No matter what our mood, the heavens are open.

It's no accident that the only other place in Mark's gospel where he uses this word for tearing open the heaven occurs when Jesus breathes His last on the cross. At that point the curtain in the temple that cut the people off from God's holy presence was torn like the heavens were above the Jordan three years earlier. Proclaiming to all the world that sin and death are no longer strong enough to keep us locked out of heaven. Jesus' baptism led to His death as a sinner in our place. Baptism and crucifixion have torn the heavens wide open for you and for me. And after this day by the Jordan the babe born in Bethlehem is revealed to be even more Immanuel, God with us, than we thought before.

When you and I were baptised, our sins were washed off us by water and the Word joined together as Jesus' commanded. But in Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan, it's reversed. In His baptism the sins of all the world are washed onto Him so that He can drag them up Calvary's hill and put them to death once and for all! It is this work that pleased the Heavenly Father because it opened heaven to all with faith. What's more it enabled God the Father to look on us through the waters of our baptism and say, "You are my son, my daughter, with you I am well pleased because your sins are forgiven in Jesus' name." Amen.