



The Mark of Mud
Mark 1:4-11
January 7, 2018

This weekend, churches all over the world are honoring Jesus' baptism. Since I am from Minneapolis, I get an electronic version of the newspaper just to keep in contact with my hometown. Several churches in town had a "Blessing of the Waters" ceremony on Friday. In sub zero weather, the priest threw a golden cross in the Mississippi River. In warmer climates, the parishioners jump into the water to retrieve the cross. The one who finds it gets a special blessing. What this says is Jesus' baptism is important. More books of the Bible talk about Jesus' baptism than his birth.

I have never preached on the Jesus' baptism because I thought there wasn't much to say. But as I studied this passage, I discovered there is so much in it that it was difficult to narrow down to one concept to share with you today. And where I ended up has nothing to do with my sermon title (so just ignore it!). Sometimes the HS leads in other directions, just as the HS led Jesus into the wilderness to be tested for 40 days after being told he was God's beloved.

So, let me share with you the road the HS led me down. As I read the passage, look at the details. I am going to head into one of those details. Prayer: Refresh us with your Word, O God. Baptize us with the power of the gospel as we hear it read and proclaimed this day. Amen.

Read Mark 1:4-11.

A few years ago, I went to a conference on faith renewal. One day, I attended a workshop on Worship and the Arts. As the teacher showed us pictures of what churches did to use art to enhance worship, our souls were filled with joy at such

beauty. And, then he told a baptism story.

An adult man, new to faith, wanted to be baptized. He wished to be dunked, but since it was a Lutheran church, they did not have a tank to dunk him in. So the pastor got creative and found a large feeding trough for horses. They placed the huge trough on the sanctuary platform and filled it with water.

When the man went under during the baptism, the water ran over the trough and down the steps of the sanctuary. "Christianity is messy," our workshop leader said. I heard people in our workshop sigh with delight as we envisioned the sloppiness of this baptism as the water ran everywhere.

I left that workshop wanting messiness in my worship and faith. We Presbyterians have a famous saying: we do things "decently and in order." Presbyterians love policies and procedures. But sometimes I crave messiness, the unexpected in our worship and walk with God.

It was Annie Dillard who said famously, "Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke?...The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return." (Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*)

That's what I long for, an unexpected entrance of God that we do not tame, perhaps even a little terrifying.

Something like that happens at the baptism of Jesus. Jesus goes down in the water, and when he comes up, it happens in this little phrase: "heaven being torn open." I never paid attention to this detail before.

This word, tearing open, is used in only one other place in Mark's Gospel, another place where something is torn open. As Jesus is dying on the cross, "the veil of the temple was torn into two from top to bottom." The veil in the temple

separated the holy stuff where God was from the common place where people were in the Temple. No one was to see the Holy stuff; the veil prevented that, but now it was open for all to see.

The Gospel of Mark begins with a tearing and ends with a tearing. In Jesus' baptism and in his death, there is a breach in what once was a separation between heaven and earth.

The word for torn is a violent word. It doesn't mean heaven opened like opening a door. It means heaven was ripped apart, torn with such ragged edges that the two edges cannot be put back together as they once were.

The torn place is where God comes through.

As the author of this Gospel is telling us about this tearing, perhaps he is remembering a quote from the OT: "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." (Isaiah 63:19)

This is exactly what has happened. God has torn open the heavens and come down. And this is why the baptism of Jesus is so very clearly a radical act. In Jesus, God has committed the act of breaking and entering the world, and the author of Mark wants the world to know.

Therefore, all of life is infused with the sacred. Heaven has been torn open because of Jesus' baptism and death. Think of that today as we prepare to tear the bread in communion. That torn place is where God comes through, the place that never closes as neatly as before.

Is there a torn place in your life?

I have a friend who is struggling with aging and the decline of his body. One day, he said to me, "I think my time on earth is coming to an end soon. I hear angels singing to me. They stop at night so I can sleep, but they start up again in the

morning. Their favorite song is “Joy to the World.”

This is the presence of God coming through the torn places in my friend’s life. Why does God allow tearing in our lives? My friend has an answer: “This confirms my faith,” he said. “I know it is real.” Wasn’t Jesus affirmed when the voice declared Jesus as the beloved Son of God?

Or, maybe your life is not torn open by pain, but torn open by the love of God. A pastor tells the true story of a homeless woman named Fayette with mental illness who began to attend her church. She joined the new member class.

The day came when they talked about baptism, and it caught Fayette’s imagination. Fayette would ask again and again, “And when I am baptized, I am...?” The class learned to respond, “Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.” “Oh, yes,” Fayette would say, and they would go back to their discussion.

The day of Fayette’s baptism came. Fayette went down, came up sputtering and cried out to the whole church, “And now I am?” And whole church responded, “Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.” “Oh, yes!” she shouted and danced.

Two months later, the pastor received a phone call. Fayette had been beaten and raped and was in a county hospital. The pastor went, and found Fayette pacing back and forth in her room saying, “I am beloved, precious child of God,” and as she caught sight of herself in the mirror – hair sticking up, blood and tears streaking her face, dress torn and dirty, she declared, “and God is still working on me. If you come back tomorrow, I’ll be so beautiful I’ll take your breath away.”

The presence of God comes through the torn places of our lives. God tore apart the heavens to get to us, to give us the Holy Spirit, to forgive us, to call us beloved and join us to Christ.

So, I come back to messiness. I call you to walk in the unexpected. Friends, God is unwilling to be confined to sacred spaces. The barriers are gone. God is no longer up in the clouds. God is on the loose in our own realm. In our baptism, the barrier

between heaven and earth has been torn asunder, the Spirit has alighted on our head and God has claimed us and called us beloved. Expect the unexpected. Maybe it is time to put on those crash helmets.