

1st Sunday after the Epiphany

Sermon 1.11.15

Scripture: Genesis 1:1-5

Acts 19:1-9

Mark 1:4-11

John's off the mark here with his baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin.

I know what you're thinking: who am I to take issue with John the Baptizer? Who am I to fault someone of his stature and staying power? Jesus, after all, submitted to such a baptism. So how off the mark could John really have been?

Of course, the fact that Jesus submitted to baptism by John has long been a subject of puzzlement, if not embarrassment, for the Church. I mean, why would someone whom we profess to be without sin need a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin? Add to this the fact that everyone, including John himself, understood and understands Jesus as "one more powerful than I" of whom none is worthy even to bend down and untie his shoes. So, again and more so, why would Jesus submit?

While we're asking questions, I wonder what happened to cause John to doubt. What do you think he saw or knew that caused him to doubt in the Temple—its promises and practices?

Consider: John's father was Zechariah, a Temple priest. That's according to Luke's gospel, not to Mark's. But let's take it as fact in this context. too.

Consider also: this was an exalted position, not one you'd walk away from, not one you'd shrug off. If your father were the president of a major corporation, you might be expected, and poised, to be the same some day. If your mother were a senator, people might anticipate your going into politics. John's father was a Temple priest, and so his work might have involved, for example, administering baptism as an occasional cleansing ritual—sort of like what John was up to at the river's edge, but mostly not like that at all.

John didn't invent baptism, but he did (it seems) invent this iteration of baptism. As for other iterations, most had been around for a long time—as a rite for cleansing and preparing, as a ritual occasionally administered to return people to a state of purity and

holiness. Later on, the Church, for its part, would sanctify a baptism of both water and the Holy Spirit—the sort Paul had in mind for the disciples he came across in Ephesus. But none of these are the sort of baptism that John was offering—John was neither a priest nor was administering in the Temple or even in Jerusalem, but was outside the city at the river Jordan, which was a significant river but not a cultic one.

It all makes you wonder; it all makes *me* wonder, what had happened to make John not believe, or perhaps no longer to believe? What happened to make him have so little confidence in the offerings of the Temple—that great love of his father’s—that he’d offer instead a bastardized version of one of its rites?

Preacher’s kids.

And while we’re poking holes: there’s something funny about the way Mark begins his gospel narrative: its focus fades from significance as soon as he really gets underway. You’d think, wouldn’t you, judging from his beginning with John and his baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin, that sin would be an abiding concern?

But Mark’s gospel doesn’t do much with sin. Mark’s Jesus doesn’t *speak* much of sin. The thing according to Mark from which humanity needs saving isn’t our own sinfulness but the world having fallen into enemy hands. The thing that Mark’s Jesus has come to save us from is the demonic and diabolical, the divisive and adversarial. Hardly the main problem, according to this understanding of the good news of Jesus Christ, sin is but a symptom of the problem. Sin is simply how humans respond to evil, behave amidst evil. But the problem itself is evil—its structures and strictures and seductions and lies.

We Goodmans are in an interesting phase in our family life. Toby is ten and more interested than ever in his friends. He goes to their houses to play; they come to ours. The world among his peer group is opening up as, one by one, they’re getting out—out of their home lives, out of their family lives. One by one, they’re getting out and they’re seeing how others live.

It's striking that in so small a town you can have so wide a spectrum as to how people live, from the most highly controlled and managed to the most disordered, almost chaotic.

The other day, Toby came home from having been at a friend's house. He said his friend was different at home than at school: at school, she's quiet and he loves her; but at home, everyone yells, and she chatters and chatters while he just follows her around, concerned and now quiet himself.

Of another friend, he said her father made her cry. Her father had said something racist and it made her cry. But why should that make her cry unless she was beginning to understand that her father's framing of the world wasn't necessarily right, might be utterly wrong? After all, hating people of other colors and creeds is only painful if you've come to know that people of other colors and creeds are people worth knowing. And, once knowing that, now you must choose: your father or the world outside your father's framing of it?

Come to think of it, this is a sort of repentance, repentance being a change in knowing, a transformation and turning of your knowing. *-noia* means knowledge and *meta*— means change, and also behind and before and beyond. So, the change in knowing that repentance implies is an enlarging of knowing, an expansion of knowing.

Given this, there is a certain dread to repentance, but not the dread we might be used to feeling when we hear John the baptizer call once again for people to come to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. What he's calling for is that the people change and moreover enlarge their knowing, enlarge *our* knowing—for he is as surely speaking to us as to those first crowds. What he is calling for is that we allow our knowing to become wisdom, and that this wisdom might bring us close to the mind of God. And what should move us to do this is the revealed and assured fact of God's forgiveness of sin.

For, listen: to repent for the forgiveness of sin isn't necessarily to repent *in order to get* forgiveness of sin. It might be to repent *because of* forgiveness of sin, repent *due to* forgiveness of sin. Yes, maybe forgiveness isn't the reward of repentance, it's the spur, it's the inspiration. Forgiveness already is, which means there should be no fear and little

shame in recognizing what we'll come to know when we allow our knowledge to expand. And I know, I know: one thing we'll come to know is how little we've known; one thing we'll come to recognize is what fools we've been, how captive we've been to a world—and to so many little worlds—that are themselves captive to lies. We've been fools. We've been defensive, maybe even cruel. We've made asses of ourselves. But there is forgiveness. All is forgiveness.

These kids—these kids in emergence—will struggle and chafe as they discover that all this time they've been inside something that has an outside. The good news in these cases, in most cases, perhaps in all cases: the good news is that the outside will come as good news.

Jesus goes out in this gospel a lot. We see it this morning—Jesus, like the rest of the people from the whole of the Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem, going *out* to John to be baptized in the river Jordan. We see it more so in his coming up *out* of the water and then seeing the heavens torn apart—that dome of firmament first put in place in the beginning, to give shape to creation, to give form to what was void, now torn open that the Spirit might come from somewhere outside it—above and beyond—and descend on him like a dove.

From here, Jesus will be driven *out* by the Spirit, *out* to the wilderness for his time of testing, after which he will come *in* to Galilee to proclaim the good news of God. Survey the narrative and see: Jesus went *in* to homes and villages, and then went *out* to deserted places all alone to pray. And, toward the end, he went *in* to Jerusalem, *in* to the Temple courts and cult, *in* to the tomb.

But at last, of course, he came *out*.

Salvation, it seems, in this gospel is *out*.

I wonder if, in other epochs, other human historical ages, this theme spoke the way it does to me now, perhaps to us now. I wonder if, in the time of the early church, or in the “dark” ages, or in the Middle Ages, this theme of *out* as the place of hope spoke at all.

Certainly, the claim that *out* was promising would have been a tough one to make in the context of scripture. The creation story imagines the establishing of an order beyond which was the chaos of a void. The exodus story imagines a wilderness threatening and barren, disordered and laid bare—until the people were given an idea for shelter in the Tabernacle and order in the Law. The time of exile threatened to recast the people into that outer darkness, which it did to a degree. So, yes, to make the claim that *out* was a place of hope and promise and possibility would have been a tough one to make—and this is, I think, one more reversal revealed in the Great Reversal that is Jesus Christ. That the last shall be first and the least shall be greatest is to be heard along side this promise: that what lies beyond our known and well-managed world is the point of promise that we should seek out to break in.

But I wonder if this is an aspect of the gospel of Jesus Christ that spoke as much in other epochs as it does to my hearing today. After all, so much of what gives our society its structure seems to be eroding. So much of what gives frame to life together we now call into question. Yeats wrote in the beginning of the last century this thing that, so prophetic, has become a cliché: “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold.” Really, so much of what once felt solid and reliable—like shelter in a storm—now is pliable, plastic, breaking down. The promise of industrialization has faded into the shadows of its consequences. The promise of rational thinking has been hobbled by its lack of imagination, paralyzed by ideology made fast into fundamentalism. The promise of freedom has been hijacked by chaos.

Meanwhile, the things that once served as solutions are now held in contempt as one more source of the problem. Government is viewed skeptically while politicians are reviled. Corporations, though so many of us are under their employ, call out our cynicism and even rage. Nations, once neatly drawn with straight-lined borders, come apart, jagged-edged around alliances that are old as the hills and as fleeting as your own dry leaves on a windy day. As for religion: don’t even get us post-moderns started on religion.

None of our shelters give much shelter anymore.

Curious, then, this savior who is always headed out.

I wonder if this was always a curious aspect of him, or one that is more prominently so these days.

Sin, I've been told, is a term that comes to the realm of religion from the realm of archery. To sin is to be off the mark. To sin is to have shot an arrow that isn't true in its hitting home. I don't know if that's right; that's just what I've been told. But it's useful to recast it in something concrete. It's useful to consider a term that's become both bloated and belittled in its abstract conceptualization, into something you can picture, even draw in a picture book.

That happens a lot. It's pretty common that some word now significant in a conceptual sense began its life as naming something concrete, something material. I suspect it happens a lot in English, which is a big, wordy language and a conceptual one too; I suspect it happens in regard to ancient language, like biblical Hebrew and Greek, which come to us from a people more concerned with matter than concepts.

I could give you a few examples here, but I won't. See me after if you're curious. Meanwhile, take my word for it, and here "sin" as one example: this word whose meaning now theologians, preachers, parishioners, the irreligious, now could all debate began in the world as simple and clear. To sin is to be off the mark, perhaps on target but not hitting its center. To sin is to be off the mark, not entirely true. And so it makes sense that, according to Mark—Mark the gospel writer, that is—sin isn't the central problem; it's merely symptomatic of a far larger problem.

John's offering a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin calls into question religious practice that doesn't achieve its goal, doesn't strike its aim. John's leaving the Temple in preference of the River Jordan, whose banks were outside the city, rightly calls out the corruption that had taken hold in established cultic practice. But it did so by simply establishing another cultic practice.

And it was good enough; it was on target, if not entirely true. It served as a theophany; God took it as an opportunity to reveal Jesus' true identity and purpose in the

world. And this wouldn't be the last time God would transform a human institution into something of divine purpose. The crucifixion would just the same, and all the more so.

John's baptism also served as a way station for Jesus as Jesus headed *out*.

This is the season of Epiphany, when we're to see and know Jesus, perhaps for the first time, perhaps anew. It's short this year; Epiphany will be short, just four weeks, for Easter coming early. So, in the words of one scripture scholar, preachers need to hit the ground running.

I've hit the ground stuttering. But we've at least hit the ground, begun our journey with Jesus again. And, in the words of another scholar, Mark is less concerned that we understand Jesus and more that we follow him. This isn't John's gospel, after all, which so much about believing in Jesus, *believing* in him that has understanding somewhere in that mix. No, this is Mark's gospel, and this is Mark's Jesus, and he's someone on the move. And so we follow; we follow him *out*.

I wonder what we'll find.

Thanks be to God.