

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Epiphany

Sermon 1.7.18

Scripture: Acts 19:1-7  
Mark 1:4-11

Please try this out this year. When you feel inundated with dreadful news, imagine yourself also full of the Holy Spirit. When you feel dragged into despair or despondency, imagine yourself also being filled with the power of the Spirit of God. You will, I'm sure, feel inundated. We all will at some point, and maybe at several points, feel as if concussed by a world that doesn't stop. "I want the world to stop," goes a pop song I like. "Give me the morning. I want the world to stop. Give me the understanding." But it doesn't stop. So, when you're caught up in its swirl and you're dizzy from the deluge, call to mind the Holy Spirit, a centering still-point, an insistent, steadying goodness.

It *might* work.

I've never gotten this story right. I've preached on it every year for sixteen years—this story of Jesus' baptism. It shows up in all three synoptic gospels, which indicates its importance to all three gospel writers and to the communities for which they wrote. Few are the stories that all three agree are worthy of inclusion. Fewer still are the stories that, though mentioned in more than one gospel, are told in same way and likely for the same purpose. This one is, though, remembered in all three synoptic gospel narratives to have happened at the same place (the river Jordan), and to have involved the same people (John, Jesus, others who'd come out to receive a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin, and the Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove from the heavens). It's even remembered to serve in the same way (as an inauguration of Jesus' ministry, though *not* as an introduction of baptism as the rite we might undergo). But, familiar as it is, I've always gotten wrong—because it's *not* an introduction to baptism as the rite we might undergo.

I've always puzzled through this as if it were, puzzled through possible meanings of this as if it were the case that we'd undergo it just as Jesus had: a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. It has always struck me as crucial that we understand what John was up to here.

Repentance, for example, I've often told you, doesn't mean what you think it means. Or, maybe it's better to say, what John is remembered to have spoken of here is badly translated

“repentance,” because what he’s actually remembered to have said is *metanoia*. What he’s actually remembered to have offered is “a baptism of *metanoia* for the forgiveness of sin.”

*Metanoia* is a Greek word that doesn’t have a good English equivalent, which is really too bad because what you find when you break it all down is a notion worthy of a good word. *-noia*, its root, means knowledge, so *metanoia* means a sort of knowledge. *Meta-*, its prefix, indicates that which lies behind and before and beyond, as in metaphysics or metanarrative or metacarpals, the bones of the hand that extend beyond the carpals of the wrist. *Meta-* implies, then, a grandeur or totality, as in metamorphosis, which is a change grander or more total than a mere morphing. And *metanoia*, then, should be heard as the sort of knowledge that is grander than conventional human knowledge is, the sort of knowledge that is the origin and aim of all other knowledge, that transcends and coheres all that we think we know.

Of course, pastor that I am, I understand this as the knowledge of God—which is not only to know God but also to know what God knows, one such thing being (according to John) that there is forgiveness of sin. There is reconciliation with God such that not even the indwelling reality of sin amidst creation is something that could separate us from God.

As it happens, pastor that I am in this place, amidst this congregation, I hear *metanoia* also as a contrast to *paranoia*. A state of mind that is a sort of split from your own mind, paranoia has you thinking there’s someone other than yourself who is also somehow inside your head, and menacingly so. I can’t speak much to what it must feel like clinically, but I can speak to what seems like paranoia when it comes to religious practice and spirituality. Conceiving of God as menace more than friend, taking God as knowing the deepest, darkest corners of your heart and worse finding what’s there displeasing, damning, or assuming God has taken that stance in regard to others, people who aren’t like you: paranoid religion is an ugly business, particularly when it’s *metanoia* to which we are called.

As for this grand knowledge as John situates it, in relation to the forgiveness of sin, we’ve tended to hear this as a cause-and-effect thing. You get baptized in order to be forgiven. But I think that’s to read it in the wrong direction. I don’t think John meant, “Repent in order to get forgiveness of sin,” but meant instead, “Repent, for there is forgiveness,” or “Repent that there is forgiveness. Transform your knowing so you might know about forgiveness, so you might *know* forgiveness. Unset your mindset that you might fully know the forgiveness that not even sin can make fail.”

Really, what I think this whole strange baptism of John is about is that we might know what God knows—that there is forgiveness of all sin, that there is reconciliation for every division, even the division that we assume divides us from God our maker and sustainer.

Hey, did you know the root of the word “devil” is *diabolo*, which is to say, divide?

Did you also know that, when Mark wrote of the heavens being torn open that God in Spirit would come down, he spoke in terms of *schizo*, torn?

Incidentally, it’s the same word he would use at the end of the narrative when, following the crucifixion, the curtain of the Temple was torn open. This curtain, as it happens, separated the inner sanctum from the inner most Holy of Holies, the room into which no one was ever allowed except the High Priest and only once a year, the room in which was kept the Ark of the Covenant. This curtain, then, which separated the people from the presence of God: it was torn open. *Schizo*: as if there would be no such separation anymore, the earthly from the holy, the human from the divine. *Schizo*: as if perhaps there had never been such a separation in the first place except insofar as we might have put in place.

But, no: it simply can’t be the case that we’re so very close to God.

Or is it, perhaps, we don’t *want* to believe we’re that close to God?

That’s a lot of responsibility, after all. It’s also to make us more exposed than we might care to be. Naked.

I just finished watching the seven seasons of “Girls.” A TV show written by, and starring, Lena Dunham, it often has, front and center, Lena’s character, Hannah, naked. She spends a lot of time in her apartment naked, which we the audience are then allowed to witness. And it’s an uncomfortable experience, I have to tell you, to see someone so plainly naked. This is all the more the case, I’m ashamed to admit, because Dunham’s is not a stylized body. She hasn’t disciplined her flesh the way TV stars are to do, especially if they’re to be revealing their bodies. Her nudity doesn’t make her nude. It makes her naked. And it’s an unnerving experience, if not for her then nonetheless for me—because she sort of looks like me and I really wouldn’t want to be naked on TV.

Our vulnerability, perhaps, amidst God’s majestic intimacy with us means not that we’re artfully nude but plainly naked.

And it’s okay.

It’s *okay*.

This, John's baptism of Jesus would have us know.

The weird thing is, though, this isn't the baptism we're meant to undergo.

John makes this quite clear when he claims, "I baptize with water but he [the one who comes after me, the one of whom I'd be unworthy even to undo his shoes] will baptize with the Holy Spirit."

Worse, it's made all the clearer when paired, as this morning, with the story from the book of Acts. Here, Paul was in Ephesus where he found some disciples and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we haven't even heard that there *is* a Holy Spirit," which has Paul confused. "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism," a fact Paul was apparently eager to correct. "John baptized with the baptism of *metanoia*, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus," and then he baptized them in the name of the Lord Jesus, laying hands on them whereupon the Holy Spirit came upon them.

The sign of this reality manifest is that the people were then able to speak in tongues and to prophesy, which is less a matter of being able to tell the future and more a matter of being able to tell the present—to see the truth of things, to understand implications and ramifications, and to name it all rightly. Prophecy isn't a matter of magical clairvoyance as much as it is a matter of deep understanding and bold honesty—and it's all made possible by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Really, as valuable as John's baptism apparently was, and so as useful as it might be for us to understand it, the fact of its focus on something *other than* the Holy Spirit seems to be its main error, its most disappointing shortfall.

Hence, perhaps, God's tearing open the heavens when it came to John's baptizing Jesus: *tearing them open* that God's Holy Spirit might come down. The Holy Spirit sort of invaded that whole thing, didn't it? It *invaded* as if in order to take this realm back.

Huh.

We'll spend the year mostly with Mark, following his narrative telling of Jesus' life and ministry, and then his passion and death and resurrection. This is Year B, Mark's year.

Mark doesn't do much with the Holy Spirit, to be honest. The Spirit is more spoken of in Luke's books, both Luke's gospel narrative and his sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, which is exemplified here in this story of Paul in Ephesus as it appears in Acts. The corrective, the

*insistence*, that the Holy Spirit be manifest in baptism, lest it not quite rise to the level of proper baptism: this is indeed very Lukan.

Mark's understanding of the gospel, though—what it demands and what it effects—implicates the Holy Spirit, just less self-consciously so. The world that Mark meets in his gospel telling is actually very much a world where the Holy Spirit is crucial. Really, I suspect only the Holy Spirit could make right what Mark perceives as wrong with this world.

Sin. It's properly thought to be the state of things in the created order. Sin is the reality that clings so closely to human experience, and sins are the actions of people ensnared in this so-called predicament. Whenever our taking action has any motivation other than self-giving love and has any effect other than absolute goodness (which is to say all the time since we really are a mixed bag), sin is our context, our cause, and our consequence—even when goodness and love are as well. There are always those “unintended consequences.”

But Mark doesn't seem to think of sin as the thing from which people need salvation, to say nothing of all creation. No, in spite of the fact that one of the first aspects of reality that Mark gets around to naming—right out of the gate, remembering as he does John offering a baptism of *metanoia* for the forgiveness of sin—sin yet isn't a driving concern in this gospel telling. No, according to Mark, sin isn't the problem, is but a symptom of the problem, or evidence of it, the problem being that the created order has fallen into enemy hands.

The created order, according to Mark, this realm, this world: it's become an occupied territory, occupied by something other than its loving creator and true king. It's into this territory, then, now occupied by an enemy force, that Christ comes, that Christ's presence works its restorative magic—and all by virtue of the Holy Spirit, this which invaded that baptism of John in order to take it all back, to reclaim it and even redeem it.

The effect Christ in the Spirit has amidst the world is one worthy of imagining more than understanding. This image: wherever Jesus shows up in this gospel, unholy spirits are put to flight. This illustration: wherever Jesus arrives in this gospel in some new place, darkness flees into shadow, unable to withstand being dark in the presence of such light. Whenever Jesus speaks, even just a word or two, the menacing and divisive noise of unrest and unpeace is quieted, cowed by the fullness and quickness of a holier spirit, indeed of the Holy Spirit.

We'll see Jesus drive out a lot of demons in this gospel narrative—so rather than falling into a preoccupation as to whether we actually believe in demons, let's instead entertain the

image of an arrival of goodness being itself enough to counteract a presence that is other than good. We'll hear of Jesus quieting unclean spirits a lot in this gospel narrative—so let's not insist on professing our sophisticated doubt that there's any such thing as unclean spirits, and instead meditate on what it might feel like to engage with a redeeming Spirit in such a way as dispels what's otherwise damaging.

This most dodgy and mysterious thing, this Holy Spirit; this thing that fills what's empty and empties out what's full, and that empowers words to speak truth and so whose sometimes absence in speech is just as voluble, not to mention cautioning: let's just go with this, for it's ours to invoke as well.

You know, in all my focus on the baptism of John, year after year, I failed to see the thing that John himself urged we most clearly see, and moreover recognize—that is, the Holy Spirit, the fact of its lack when John just started out and the fact of its coming when it came John's baptizing Jesus. John indeed knew his baptism would serve a purpose, even a good purpose—and so it does. It just doesn't serve as a final word. No, it would be improved on, it would be made more full—made so by Jesus' submission to it and then the Holy Spirit's invasion of it.

It's this rite, of course, as invaded and made full by the Holy Spirit, that we have perhaps undergone. Those of us who've been baptized by the church, baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: we've been brought into the presence of this Holy Spirit, filled with it, quickened by it, and sent forth in its power—sent forth in the faith that the Holy Spirit continues to bless and fill this world, piece-by-piece, moment-by-moment, sent forth that we might be as Christ was in the world, a healing presence simply by showing up.

Actually, it's only by this that I'm made hopeful for the coming year, when though the herky-jerk of history will continue its daily assault, we might yet withstand and counteract, each and all of us a spirited presence that stills and quiets such jangling unrest. It's only by this insistent, forceful presence that I feel energized, rather than enervated, about all that lies ahead.

I'm not one to imagine the world at spiritual war. There are some who are, some who like to imagine the world as a theater for the greatest war ever there was or would be, between the spiritual forces of God and those that oppose God. This is the image some people invoke for their lives of faith. Not so for me. I imagine God as one whose presence amidst the world and about the world is simply more forceful than some militant force. I imagine God as one who speaks and it is so—no struggle, no back-and-forth.

And yet, I do like Mark. My favorite gospel, Mark's has me going with him—because I think it's also true, true at least to my experience. If not ultimately, then at least imminently, I do feel a struggle going on. It jangles. It unnerves, and even intimidates. I check the headlines. I check the headlines. I check the headlines. And my mind feels exhausted. My brain feels injured, such that the invading presence of the Holy Spirit I suspect might be as medicine, come in force, come in peace.

We should be careful about imagining some spiritual conflict going on. This, which can be powerful to save, can also be powerful to deceive.

We should also be careful about downplaying the urgency of our task as people who believe in love.

You know, the old hymn doesn't go, "Onward, Christian soldiers, marching *off* to war." It goes, "Onward, Christian soldiers, marching *as* to war." And it's a fine line, I realize. It's easy to conflate the two, to mistake the one for the other. We don't sing it anymore for this reason. But it floats around in my mind, as if at the ready, for whenever marching orders might help me get up and get going.

Yesterday was Epiphany, the day after the twelfth day of Christmas, the day when Magi are remembered to arrived at last on the scene where Jesus born. Today we celebrate the invasive arrival of the Holy Spirit on a religious rite that was missing something. Tomorrow, or maybe sooner, maybe this afternoon, you be the arrival. *You* be the one whose presence is a countervailing force to otherwise unrest, un-peace, un-truth. *You* be the one whose showing up is clarifying, saving, redeeming. Let that be you, and I'll let it be me. And the world will fall silent for a moment of all its confused jangling, so full will it be of the clear sounding truth of the Holy Spirit.

Thanks be to God.