You are Beloved

Epiphany 1, January 10, 2020

Mark 4: 1-13 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Its been quite a week. Many of us are upset with the insurrection of those who broke into the US capitol building and disrupted the joint session confirming the Election results and the Electoral college. It was a violent uprising incited by the President in a rally that morning, and in his speeches and social media posts and promotions for the gatherings in previous weeks. Many people have noted that the vast majority of the protestors and insurrectionists were white and there was not anywhere near the kind of security that there was earlier in the year during the Black Lives Matter protests, yet there were many indications that there could be violence and a breach of property, in contrast to the mainly peaceful protests by Black Lives Matter supporters. In Media reports and images from the day, you could see many flags from different countries (some say, indicating representation from different white supremacist groups) as well as flags that said “Jesus 2020”. As followers of Jesus, their actions seem very incongruent with how Jesus, whose birth we just celebrated as the prince of peace, lived and calls us to live. Jesus never supported insurrection, even though some of his followers wanted him to, but supported peace and justice, even while challenging the system. As we look to Jesus’ baptism today, we could ask the question, how well these followers of Jesus, if baptized, were living out their baptism.

Today we begin following the gospel of Mark, who identifies his telling as the good news of Jesus Christ. As we move through Mark you may notice that the pace of the telling is rapid. He uses the word ‘immediately’ a lot and in todays story of the baptism, skips over a lot of the details that the other gospels include, focusing on the impact of the baptism, the voice from the sky and the dove of the Holy Spirit, then ‘immediately’, that spirit thrusts him into the desert to face Satan. The spirit descends upon Jesus upon Jesus like a dove. The voice declares that ‘You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased’. This would have been a profound experience to anyone gathered. First that Jesus comes to John to be baptised just like all the others who have gathered to repent, be baptised and were following John. This identification with the people is an invitation for them, for us, to become identified with Jesus and his vision, which we learn is a vision of the reign of the God of peace, the Abba of creation. He becomes like us so that we may become like him. This is how we may embrace and live out our baptism, to learn about and follow in his way of peace and love.

Just before the Spirit comes down like a dove, Mark tells us that the heavens are torn apart. The Greek word used here is the same word that is used to describe the moment when Jesus dies on the cross and the temple curtain is torn in two. It is the word that John uses when the Roman soldiers at the foot of the cross determine not to tear Jesus’ garment and divide it amongst them. It is the word that resonates in the prophecies of Isaiah, but particularly when Isaiah says to God in Isaiah 63:19, “O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down,”. Mark understands this very clearly that in Jesus, this is exactly what has happened. God has torn open the heavens and come down. God joins us on earth, in our lives. It is not something that is just then. When the veil was torn in the temple which separated the Holy of Holies, from the people, it was a permanent change. It indicated that it was not only the sanctuary of the priests, but was for all the people. Likewise, the heavens tearing apart and God coming in Jesus is not just for that time, but for all time. God no longer dwells in heaven but in Christ, in us, with us. This is what incarnation is all about and truly means. God is with us, and as the Message translation interprets, Jesus is the word who became flesh and moved into the neighbourhood. And so, as God affirms Jesus as his beloved son, or beloved child, each one of us are affirmed as well as beloved children of God.

When have you experienced this presence of God in and amongst us? When have you known or experienced knowing that you are a beloved child of God? When have you experienced that awareness that God has torn into your life and made God’s presence known? During our check-in at the Congregational Care meeting on Thursday we often hear stories of God’s presence in our lives. This week was no exception. Elaine Hill was sharing about her week and the challenges of continuing through this pandemic time, and going on a walk and receiving support from friends (from Eastside). When she got back home there was a bouquet of flowers from Jean Mackay just as a thank you for Elaine sharing with folk after worship something she had shared with Elaine – ‘I’m so glad that God thought of flowers. That was one of her best ideas’. It really touched Elaine and as I listened to the story I thought it was a moment of God’s presence breaking into our lives. The heavens tear open and God comes down. We so often experience God through the love, support and kindness of others. We are beloved of God.

Most of us if we are baptised, don’t remember our baptism because we were probably babies. But we can remember what happened afterward, because now is the afterward. Everything after our baptism, the life we live as followers of Jesus is that afterward. Jesus became human so that we can become like him. How are we doing at being like him? At loving one another, and loving our neighbour. We see many examples of so many of us doing well at living and loving like Jesus, when we experience God and God’s love through others. We may question how those we saw earlier this week in the US Capitol are living out their baptism. Where was the peace, the love, the compassion? However, what is important is the example that we live as we seek to share our faith and live out Jesus’ message of peace, justice, love, and compassion.

May we be open to the presence of God with us, who has torn open the heavens and come down to be with us in Christ. May we have compassion for those whom we feel challenged by how they live out their faith, and be even more faithful in our response. May we know that we are beloved children of God, blessed, with whom God is well pleased.