

Genesis 1:1-5  
Acts 19:1-7  
Mark 1:4-11  
Psalm 29

We have just come to the close of the 12 Days of Christmas. That happened yesterday at the Feast of the Epiphany when we mark the arrival of the Magi. The three kings from the east brought gifts to the infant Jesus and confirmed his identity as the king of Kings...the Jewish Messiah. It's a memorable moment in the life of Jesus and in our understanding of who Jesus is. It is the moment that we mark Jesus as Emmanuel, "God with us." The Magi confirm the incarnation of God in the infant Jesus. The Feast of the Epiphany is part of the Christmas story. And all of us have certain traditions and memories that come alive each year during the Christmas season.

One of my most vivid memories and expectations on Christmas morning is the sound of children ripping wrapping paper off a package they've found with their name on it. The ripping comes to a crescendo as the paper is torn apart to reveal the wonderful gift hidden underneath, but now in full view. Those squeals of delight and pure joy are hard to forget and linger in the air on Christmas morning like the fragrant scent of a live Christmas tree. Those are the sounds and smells burned into our memory. We don't forget them.

Nor should we forget the story we just heard in our gospel lesson this morning. A bit like the gospel of John, the gospel of Mark does not begin with the nativity story. The writer of the gospel of Mark doesn't seem nearly as concerned with Jesus' pedigree as the authors of Luke and Matthew who give us some extensive information about Jesus' heritage as well as the circumstance of his birth.

The author of Mark just jumps right in with John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus. By verse 9 in the first chapter, Jesus appears as a grown man at the banks of the River Jordan for his baptism. For the author of Mark, this is when it all began...not in a stable 30 years earlier, but in the River Jordan. John's baptism is one of ritual purification...of repentance...of forgiveness...and cleansing for a fresh start. He keeps telling people that he's not The One...that The One who is greater than he is and who is coming after him will baptize people not with water but with the Holy Spirit.

So let's just pause here for a moment and think about that. The River Jordan is a significant spot for baptism because it is the border between the desert or wilderness and the promised land.

One who had been wandering in the wilderness and who crossed through the River Jordan arrived in the promised land when he came up out of the water. So baptism in the River Jordan is more than just a cleansing or purification ritual. Baptism in the River Jordan is what one does to arrive in the promised land. It's a symbolic place of new beginnings and new life.

We have just marked the beginning of a new year for us...the year 2018...so we, too, are thinking about new beginnings. We are starting a new calendar year full of hopes and possibilities and resolutions and promises. We have hopes and expectations for this new year and we wait a little anxiously to see how it turns out.

As Jesus steps into the water of the River Jordan for baptism, he is also participating in a new beginning for himself. There are numerous theological debates about why the sinless Jesus has presented himself for baptism. If Jesus is sinless, why did he present himself for a baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sins and purification? It's a good question. One theory is that while Jesus is sinless himself, he carries with him...to the cross...the sins of the whole world. Another theory is that he presented himself to John for baptism because it was part of the ritual associated with the Jewish religious practices...just as his parents had presented him...their firstborn son...at the Temple to dedicate him to God. That, too, was part of Jewish religious practice. So John does as he is asked even though he knows that the one he is baptizing with water will baptize others with the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus comes up out of the water, the scripture says that "he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him." For that brief moment when the heavens were torn apart, earth and heaven were transparent to one another. And a voice came from heaven speaking directly to Jesus and saying "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." For just a tiny moment in time, the Trinity was revealed: the love of the Father for the Son and the love of the Son for the Father and the love that binds them in the Holy Spirit. In just the twinkle of an eye, it was all right there. The hope of the new creation that Jesus brings with him...that he teaches us about...the new creation that is his legacy to us... is visible to us for only a split second. Just like those gift wrapped Christmas packages in the eager hands of those unwrapping them, we get a peek at what's in store, but unlike our Christmas presents, this gift is wrapped back up again. If you've ever once gotten a glimpse of what's in store for us, you'll never forget it.

It's a new beginning for Jesus. It is the beginning of his ministry...his mission on earth. Just like we are at a new beginning for ourselves in this new calendar year. The Holy Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness for his period of temptation and surely as we try to live into our own resolutions and our own promises of a changed lifestyle in the new year, we are going to

become fully acquainted with the power of temptation. We also have the possibility of becoming acquainted with the power of the Holy Spirit within us, just as Jesus did.

In a few minutes we are going to be reaffirming our baptismal vows...the ones that were taken for us by Godparents if we were baptized as infants and the ones we took on for ourselves at the Confirmation of our Baptism. We can speak afresh the promises that we made when we were baptized into the body of Christ and sealed as one of Christ's own forever. Just as Jesus was baptized by the Holy Spirit, anyone baptized into Christ receives that same power of the Holy Spirit...for without it, none of us can accomplish the things we want to do in the name of Jesus Christ.

And when we have renewed our Baptismal vows, we will also have the opportunity to come to the rail for healing and anointing. The healing of Jesus Christ is not just one of physical healing, but also of spiritual and emotional healing as well. When you come to the rail, bring with you all that troubles you as well as all that brings you hope. Bring with you the disappointments, the discouragement, the frustration, the sense of frailty that travel with all of us throughout our lives. These are all part of the human experience and are the very things that dim the light of Christ within each one of us. Ask God to heal you of all the thoughts and feelings that make it difficult for you to spread the light of Christ in the way that you live and to share it with all the people that you encounter each day.

When Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were torn apart and the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus and entered in. When we allow our hearts to be torn apart we allow the light of Christ to enter in. It is the broken heart that is open to Christ...no longer hard or calloused, but defeated and dependent and opened wide like the arms of a small child seeking comfort. The light of Christ that enters in and overshadows every bit of darkness that might reside within us. If we allow it, that light can give us new hope, new confidence, and a new sense of purpose. The heart torn apart is the heart wide open to the Holy Spirit and to all the wonders of the new creation that is the legacy of Jesus Christ. We become new creatures in Christ.

It is the most magnificent gift we shall ever receive.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.