

Baptism of Our Lord - Beginning of God News

January 10, 2016

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Psalm 91: 9-12; Mark 1: 1-20

Grace to you and peace from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

It's the second book in the New Testament but it was the first written record of the life and teachings of Jesus. The gospel of Mark can take your breath away. In ten chapters he will tell of the three years of Jesus' ministry. He opens by announcing, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." And off he goes at a pace that makes you want to say, "Slow down, man.... Where's the baby Jesus? Mary, Joseph, manger, shepherds and magi?" But Mark isn't listening. He has an important, world-shaking, life-changing story to tell about Jesus Christ, THE SON OF GOD. Jesus of Bethlehem is no longer "small and passive enough to be picked up for a while like a cute puppy, and put down again when we're good and ready to get on with our plans."¹ Jesus is a grown man who has developed his voice and found his leg. Jesus is loose in the world and comes for us.² Of all the gospels, Mark captures the urgency in Jesus' message and the urgent need to continue "the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

This makes Mark's gospel ready-made for the Epiphany season that stretches from Christmas to Lent. An epiphany is something surprising, sudden, profound that evokes an "immediate and meaningful understanding of something."³ That's what Mark believes the "good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" is. So Mark brings us quickly to Jesus, in a matter of sentences. We meet John the Baptist. Jesus is baptized. The heavens are torn and a voice announces, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Before we can take it in, Jesus has a forty day retreat in the desert with wild beasts while being tempted by Satan and attended by angels — covered in two scant verses. With any questions still on our tongues, we're told John is in prison and Jesus begins his public ministry. He proclaims good news, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Before we can bat an eye, Mark brings us to a beach to watch Jesus call four different fishermen to follow him into the unknowns of his ministry. "Immediately," they do. We get no description of previous relationships or inner struggles, the details we'd like to know. But that seems to be one of Mark's main points. Don't get sidetracked or distracted. Jesus doesn't ask disciples to commit to a doctrinal statement, denominational tradition, a specific five-year plan. Jesus says, "follow me." and we, too, must decide if you, I, we will commit ourselves to Jesus Christ. That is to be our epiphany this morning and each morning. This is to be our sudden,

profound, startling splash of cold water that rouses us to action: Jesus stands on that beach, looks into our eyes, crooks his finger and says, “Come with me -- belong to me – follow me.”⁴

I want to believe that each time we hear God’s Word, feast at God’s Table, gather and serve as God’s community, we again hear Jesus say, “follow me.” But in all honesty, I think we can forget. We can be distracted. I think we can be lulled into a comfort and complacency in our faith in which we’ve shutdown our awareness of epiphanies, of Jesus unexpectedly tapping us on our shoulders asking us to “repent, turn around, follow me, baptized and Beloved child of God.”

At a resort in Northern California. Just out of college a young man gets a job that combines being the night desk clerk at a resort and helping with the horses in the stable. The owner-manager is Swiss/Italian with European notions about conditions of employment. The young man and the boss do not get along. One is 22 and pretty free with his opinions; the other is 52 and has a few opinions of his own.

One week the employees were served the same thing for lunch everyday: 2 wieners, a mound of sauerkraut, and stale rolls. To compound the insult with injury, the cost of the meal was deducted from their pay. The young man was outraged.

On Friday night of that week, the young man was at his desk job around 11 p.m. when the night auditor came on duty. The young man went to the kitchen to get a snack and saw a note to the chef that the employees were again to eat wieners and sauerkraut on Saturday. "That does it. I quit."

For lack of a better audience, the young man unloaded on the night auditor, Sigmund Wollman. He declared that he had it up to here, that he was going to throw the wieners and the sauerkraut right in the face of the owner. In his own words, he said, "I am sick and tired of this misery and nobody is going to make me eat wieners and sauerkraut for a whole week and make me pay for it and who does he think he is anyhow and the horses are nags and the guests are fools and I'm packing my bags and heading for Montana where they wouldn't feed wieners and sauerkraut to the hogs."

He went on for some twenty minutes. He ended with a call to arms, freedom, unions, uprising, and the breaking of the chains of the working masses. As he pitched his fit, Sigmund Wollman sat quietly on his stool, smoking a cigarette and watching him with sorrowful eyes. Survivor of Auschwitz. Three years. Thin. Coughed a lot. He liked being alone at the night job. It gave him peace and quiet and time to read sometimes, and even more, he could go into the kitchen and have a snack anytime he wanted to — all the wieners and sauerkraut he wanted. To him, a

feast. More than that, at night there was nobody around to tell him what to do. At Auschwitz he dreamed of such a time.

"Are you finished?" he said to the young man.

"No. Why?" the young man replied.

"Lissen. Lissen me. You know what's wrong with you? It's not the wieners and sauerkraut and it's not the boss and it's not the chef and it's not the job."

"So, what's wrong with me?"

"You think you know everything, but you don't know the difference between an inconvenience and a problem. If you break your neck, if you have nothing to eat, if your house is on fire, then you have a problem. Everything else is inconvenience. Life is inconvenience. Life is lumpy. Learn to separate the inconveniences from the real problems. You will live longer. And will not annoy people like me so much. Good night."

In a gesture combining dismissal and blessing, he waved the young man off to bed.

The young man in this story is Robert Fulghum. He wrote: "Seldom in my life have I been hit between the eyes with truth so hard." Years later I heard a Japanese Zen Buddhist describe what the moment of enlightenment was like, and I knew exactly what he meant. There in the late night darkness of the Feather River Inn in 1959, Sigmund Wollman simultaneously gave me a swift kick and opened a window in my mind... In times of stress and strain, when something has me backed to a wall, I think of Wollman: "Problem or inconvenience?"⁵ An epiphany moment. "Follow me," Jesus said.

Pastor Winifred Collins recounts a time she was rolling through the supermarket, tossing item after item into the cart, in what she called "the usual hurried flurry of consumption." At the checkout counter, she was impatient because the line was moving so slowly. She kept eyeing the other lanes to see if they were moving faster. They weren't, so she peered around to see who on earth was holding up her line. She saw an old couple with a few items already scanned. People thin as wisps, conferring over her opened purse, looking into it like it was a wishing well. They don't have quite enough to make it. Pastor Collins wrote, "And there I stand, cart loaded to overflowing. A kick in the rear and a window opens. 'For God's sweet sake, what on earth am I doing with all this stuff when they are so thin?'"⁶ It was an epiphany moment. She unexpectedly sensed Jesus turning her around as he said, "follow me."

What does it mean to "belong to and follow Jesus"? It means giving ourselves to Jesus each and every day. It means to "Know him, follow him, love him, listen for him,"⁷ look for him. We'll

find him in unexpected places, in quiet or bombastic moments of epiphany because our Lord is not done revealing God's self, kingdom and victory. Jesus is not done inviting us to follow and become fishers of people, helping to create the world as God would have it. If Mark's gospel is the "beginning of the good new" then we are its continuation. Perhaps that is why our brother Mark's gospel bypasses details in order to keep us in front of Jesus ---- watching and listening to Jesus ---- who urgently asks us to respond NOW — the now of each minute, each hour, each opportunity to follow Jesus into loving, helping, healing, praying, feeding, and inviting others into the presence and ways of our Lord. Most often there's no time to pack bags, make a few more arrangements, talk it over with friends on Facebook. Jesus needs us in each NOW to follow him into saving the world. And the interesting, counter-intuitive thing is this — When we follow and bind ourselves to Jesus we discover this great freedom and strength to leave behind what is not helpful, change, turn back around to Jesus again and again and grow into the "Beloved" child of God we were created and baptized to be. "Follow me," Jesus says. When you choose to believe and follow, get ready for the wild ride of epiphany faith that will not leave you alone or idle, that will continually challenge and change you and bring you to life that is rich with wonder, peace and meaning. So be ready if you say, "Amen."

Linda M Alessandri 1/9/16

ENDNOTES

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1. Julie Pennington-Russel, "Our First Calling" September 7, 2008 as posted on www.day1.org
 2. Adapted from sentence in "Our First Calling"
 3. Karoline Lewis "Epiphany Expectations" Sunday, January 11, 2015 posted on www.workingpreachers.org
 4. Julie Pennington-Russell, "Our First Calling" September 7, 2008 as posted on www.day1.org
 5. Robert Fulghum, Uh-Oh, 1991 as cited by Winifred Collins, "A Swift Kick and the Window Opens" January 26, 1997 as posted on www.dayone.org
 6. Winifred Collin, "A Swift Kick and the Window Opens" January 26, 1997 as posted on www.day1.org
 7. Julie Pennington-Russell, "Our First Calling" September 7, 2008 as posted on www.day1.org