

Mark 1:4–11

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

Taught for the Baptism of Our Lord, Year B (Revised Common Lectionary) · 5 January 2021

Well, my friends, here we are in the Epiphany season, ready to rip. God's peace to you, and the joy of the new year, church year and otherwise. We'll go to work on the First Sunday after the Epiphany.

While in most stories revelation dispels hiddenness, in Jesus' story the two generally go side by side, at least for the time being. There is coming a time (eventually; why not now?) when the revelation will dispel all hiddenness. But for the time being we live under the sign of the cross, and so the hiddenness remains. The combination is evident in the Gospel for this Sunday. The story is buried deep in the ordinary. A man is baptizing by the river Jordan. Baptism by itself is significant, of course, but in those days it was a lustral washing. The river Jordan has all kinds of significance historically, but it's basically a desert stream, sometimes not a stream at all but a mud puddle, a moving mud puddle. So there is nothing very distinguished here.

The hiddenness encloses the story, holding it just barely above the level of insignificance. There is absolutely nothing about the story so far that sets it apart. Even the story of the appearance: he was in the water, and he looked up; he saw, he heard. But we don't know how many other people saw and how many other people heard. He saw and he heard. It could have been indigestion; it could have been a passing fancy. There's nothing definitive. He saw, he heard. Well, we hope the rest of them did too, but we don't know that. Mark doesn't tell us. He saw, and he heard. And so the story begins: "The beginning of the gospel," in the wilderness, buried so profoundly in the ordinary that it looks like nothing significant whatsoever.

The supporting texts help us. They point out what's really important here. God is the speaker, according to Psalm 29, and that by itself raises the ante. Genesis 1:1–5 tells the story of God creating by his word: he speaks, and it comes to be. And Romans 6, one of the great texts in the whole shooting match: we are joined to him in a death like his, that we might be joined to him in a resurrection like his. The joining power is in the Word as it expresses itself in the water. So we are born again kicking and screaming, looking for something a little more

comfortable, trying to get away. But there he comes. He's got us, and he's taking us down into the water to drown us with Christ Jesus, that we might be raised with him. What's better than that? What a swim.

So we'll take it from there and go to work on these texts, hoping to help you hear some of their depths. I don't want to take responsibility for a full exegesis of the texts. You know I'm pointing, like an old rabbi, to what sticks out and what's preachable, what you can have some fun with. I hope it's helpful to you. A lot of you have been hanging around a long time; you've heard this all before. But I know there are some sinners out there, so we can have some fun. God's peace to you, and all the best.

Psalm 29: The Voice of the Lord

We begin with the supporting texts, as usual, and we've got Psalm 29. "Ascribe to the Lord, you gods, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness." An invocation, a call to worship, a beautiful, powerful expression of what it is to be brought into the hearing of the Word. With this little introduction we move to the voice of the Lord, and we get several verses on the power of God's voice. "The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders; the Lord is upon the mighty waters." There we go. God speaks with a voice of thunder, and the clap of the thunder is heard upon the waters. "The voice of the Lord is a powerful voice." This is God speaking. When he speaks, as the analogy of thunder suggests, he speaks with power, so that it rolls out across the water and we hear it.

"The voice of the Lord is a voice of splendor. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedar trees; the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon." These great tall trees. We've got them in Oregon too, spruces five and six centuries old. They stand tall, beautiful, magnificent. We lost a bunch of redwoods down in California in the fires this summer, those magnificent trees, hundreds of years old. Some of them were standing there when Jesus was born, a long way away. Can you imagine? These trees are just huge, and they speak of the power of the Word. "The voice of the Lord is a voice of splendor. He breaks the cedars of Lebanon." With his speaking he splits that tree right down the center.

"He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Mount Hermon like a young wild ox. The voice of the Lord splits the flames of fire; the voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh." Well, there's going to be a voice in the wilderness now as we move into

the texts, and the supporting text prepares us for that. All this cacophony, all this mess, all this chaos, the wilderness running wild as usual, but now it's shaken. It's shaken by the Word. "He strips the forests bare. And in the temple of the Lord all are crying, 'Glory!' The Lord sits enthroned above the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as King for evermore."

"The Lord shall give strength to his people." Look at it turn here. He's turned toward you now. You're one of them. He's going to give you strength. He's not just going to show off his power, rolling thunder and splitting trees. He's going to speak to you, and he's going to give strength to you. "The Lord shall give his people the blessing of peace." Can you imagine all that transcendent power rolling over his shoulders as he takes hold, and then his turning to you with blessing, grace, and mercy? So you're going to make it, in spite of this wildness. Good.

Genesis 1: Let There Be Light

So we've got Psalm 29 to set things up, and from there we go to Genesis 1:1–5. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Blows your mind. Out of nothing he created the heavens and the earth. "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. And God said." God spoke. God brought all the force of his being to the tip of his tongue. God expressed himself. God came out in the open. He spoke. He is a God who speaks, a God who preaches, who declares, who speaks to you.

"And God said": but right now he doesn't have you in mind. He wants to turn the lights on. "And God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good." Can you imagine? I hope so. Our imaginations have grown dull with our sins. These great stories that enlighten us, literally and figuratively, that open before us a world of light, grow dim to us. We are lost in our sins and can barely hear what's being said here. "Let there be light." And what happened? The lights went on. No switch. He called forth the light by his speaking.

"And God saw that the light was good." Well, of course; how could it be anything else? The beauty of the light. When I read these stories I always remember fishing at night along the Oregon coast, up all night chasing striped bass with a friend of mine. Then the light would slowly come across the water. The world would open. There would be light. "God saw that the light was good; and God separated" what? "The light from the darkness." Makes sense, doesn't it? If you turn the lights on, the darkness goes away. That's usually the way it works. "And

God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.” What fun. “And there was evening and there was morning, one day.” Not bad. We start here. First of all he walks in and turns the lights on, so that there can be sight and movement. God creates light by his word. When he speaks, the lights come on. What a lot of fun. Beautiful.

Romans 6: Buried with Him

From there we go to another text that’s full of light. These supporting texts are pretty heavy this Sunday. We come to Romans 6:1–11, one of the great high holy texts of the book of Romans. “What then are we to say?” Well, what a question. What the heck is going on here? What in the world is this? How can we find language for this? “Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?” Among sinners there’s no alternative. What a question. But it’s the right question, absolutely the right question, because now the gospel has dawned, and all your mommy’s reasons for good behavior have evaporated. No kidding. The good Lord has taken the limits off. What then? “Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?” For a sinner there’s no question. Of course! But now we are being created anew, and there is an alternative. Not out of our own will, of course; we keep falling into sin.

“Do you not know?” Can you imagine? “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” The enthusiasts figured they’d been baptized into power and there was no limit on it. But the apostle Paul turns it right around. We’re baptized into what? Into his death, so that we die with him. “Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” Not in any other circumstance, not walking on our own two feet, but raised with him, we walk with him; and walking with him, we walk in the creation.

“For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” You go down with him; you go up with him. You go into the grave with him, and he’s fussing and stirring and rolling over and saying, “Time to get up. Let’s go.” What could be better than that? Now you can hear his voice in your ear: “Let’s get out of here. Let’s get out of this realm of death and dance in the light of day. Come on, let’s go.” “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly” (without question, as sure as you’re sitting there) “be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

“We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.” That’s the trouble right now. Of course, we’ve got no alternative. We’re bound and determined to go down, to sink into the abyss, thinking of it as pleasure, thinking of it as achieving and grasping and growing and developing, thinking of it as just exactly the opposite of what it is. It’s death. “Our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.”

And how did that happen? Are you aware of it happening? Did you go out and volunteer for this? Of course not. Would you like to have it? No, no, no, no. This is what happens every day. We get struck down. We lose our grip. We get thrown. We lose control. We’re carried beyond ourselves. We are dead. Dead men walking. No alternative at all. “Our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be brought to nothing”: nothing, zilch, nada. Christ broke the grip of the evil one, so that we might no longer be enslaved. “For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin.”

Sin has no prospect for you. Sin is going to spit you out. Christ is going to stick his finger down its throat and make it gag you up, so that you come out raised to newness of life. Free. Can you believe it? “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” Now tell me, what could be better than that? You’re dead to sin and alive to Christ. You’re dead to all your fears and all the bondage, dead to all the longings, dead to all the attempts to grasp and define. You’re free.

Mark 1: A Voice in the Wilderness

So we’ve got supporting texts that set up the Word and the power of the sacraments. Now we’re going to go out into the wilderness with dear John. “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Where did he appear? Of all places, where the wild things are: in the wilderness, where everything flies loose and bumps and grinds, where everything is out of control. That’s the wilderness. I had a cousin from New York. I loved that guy. He grew up in an apartment in New York, of all places, one of my first cousins. The first time he saw the wilderness, he said, “Boy, if I had my vacuum cleaner, I could really clean this place up.” Well, that’s the wilderness. It’s not clean. It’s wild. There are things that go bump in the night, unpredictable and out of control. You

hear your house settling in the cold, and you hear those bumps and think, “Someone’s in here.” That’s the wilderness. It can break out anyplace.

So John the Baptist appears in the wilderness. And the secret is that wherever he goes, he takes the wilderness with him. Wherever John is, the wilderness breaks out. He’s identified with the wilderness. So when you’re in the wilderness and you hear somebody moving and breathing beside you, when you hear a word in the wilderness, who do you suppose that might be? Probably John the Baptist. He’s looking for company. He saw you in the wilderness and thought, “Another one in the wilderness.” There he is. He takes the wilderness with him. You’ve heard me make these jokes before: he’s like Joe Btfsplk in the old *Li’l Abner* cartoon. Wherever he went, trouble followed him. So with John the Baptist: wherever he goes, the wilderness breaks out. So when you’re in the wilderness, who’s there? John the Baptist, just trying it on, wondering what this wilderness will be like.

The wilderness breaks out wherever he is. And in the wilderness there is what? A voice. I don’t know what kind of experience you have had of the wilderness. My most profound experience of the wilderness was in Chicago. Carolyn and I were down there looking for a Lutheran church, and we didn’t know our way around. We went walking, looking for a church, and discovered we were walking in Cabrini-Green, one of the high-crime areas. Carolyn was hanging on to me for dear life, and I was scared to death myself. What is wilderness? Wilderness is where nothing is predictable, where everything is loose and out of control, where you can’t predict, you can’t expect, you don’t know what’s going to happen next. When the wilderness breaks out and you’re in it, you’re in its grip. You’re caught.

Ordinarily there’s no voice in the wilderness. There’s silence, long, profound silence, just the silence. Through the years we would go canoeing up in the Boundary Waters. Sometimes we’d take our boys and go up for a couple of weeks at a time. At night, if you heard a voice, there was something wrong. But now in the wilderness there is a voice. That’s why John is there. That’s why he’s been sent there. That’s why he’s the prophet of the wilderness. That’s where he appears. And when you’re in the wilderness and you hear a voice, who is that? God has sent you a preacher. He has sent you a John the Baptist, someone who speaks God’s word. So into the wilderness, where everything flies loose and out of control, the Word comes and abides. The Word goes there. The Word finds you there. The Word expresses itself there.

So in the wilderness there’s a voice, and there’s a preacher standing under a lamp, like the lamppost in the Chronicles of Narnia. Where in the world else would he be? He’s in the

wilderness, and he's speaking. And he speaks in such a way as to express the very being of God to you: to hand over the goods, to declare to you, to bless you. So there is a voice in the wilderness, a preacher who has been sent, and that preacher's name is John. Can you imagine? What a fabulous story. Only the good Lord would think up stories like this. This is just nuts.

In the wilderness, a voice: John the Baptist. And what's he wearing? He's not fit for a dance or a prom. He's got grasshoppers on his breath and grasshopper juice running down his lips, and he's got a girdle. That's enough to drive a teenage boy right out of his mind. He's got a girdle made of camel's hair, and he eats grasshoppers. That's what you get in the wilderness: somebody a little odd, who has odd taste, who likes grasshoppers, and who likes wild people, who likes sinners. Well, John's fit for that. So he is sent into the wilderness, and the wilderness goes with him. When he gets there, if it's not a wilderness yet, it will become one, because he's there. So in the wilderness God speaks. He sends a preacher who declares his word. And as the wilderness breaks out, so too breaks out the promise of the gospel.

He Will Baptize You with the Holy Spirit

So now we've got the wilderness, and we've got a preacher, and so we've got a voice. But John the Baptist wants to point out one significant difference from the ordinary, run-of-the-mill preacher who is good enough in the wilderness. Holy smokes, just getting a word in the wilderness is a great gift. But he wants to tell you there is something different, something way better. "How much more," as the apostle Paul likes to say. The logic of the gospel is the logic of riches. It's a logic of blessing, the logic of overflow, of being flooded, of having it come down to you full of grace.

So the logic of the gospel isn't satisfied with signification. It isn't satisfied with filling in the blanks, or drawing connections ourselves, or finding the meaning of the text so we can apply it. That's not the gospel; that's a do-it-yourself kit. You can buy that at the dime store. What do you want that for? Signification, good night. That's just foolishness. It's good for making models, good for drawing road maps, good for offering philosophical explanations. But the gospel is going to overflow that stuff. Holy smokes, it's just going to pour down grace.

So listen to Mark 1: "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water." I have washed you, like Mary washing Jesus' feet with her hair. "I have baptized you with water; but"

(but what? but what?) there is something more than water. “I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you” with what? “With the Holy Spirit.”

I baptize you externally, but he will take hold of your heart and reshape you and make you new. He won't give you an instruction book that you have to follow and apply yourself to assiduously. He's going to make you new, so that you have no alternative about it, so that nobody is going to come and say, “You've got to make a choice.” He's going to make you new in such a way that all thoughts of choice go straight out the window, where they belong. What good is that choice, for Pete's sake? Oh no, he's not going to leave you with choices on your hands. He's going to take hold of you by his Spirit. The Spirit of the risen Christ is already at work in you. He has been at work in you, and he is going to keep working in you, so that you have no alternative, so that all you can say is, “Boy, I'll take some more of that. Amen. Don't just wash my hands. Wash my hands and my feet and my head and my heart. Wash me thoroughly.”

What a joyous blessing. He's going to wash you in the Holy Spirit. And what will happen to you then? Then the new creation has happened to you. You can hang around with a friend and speak the Word. This is just fabulous. He's not going to baptize you with lessons and instruction books, or with a list of rules and regulations. He's going to baptize you with the Holy Spirit, so that you'll be sunk in him, so that you won't have an alternative in the world, so that you'll rejoice in him. When you hear his word, you'll say, “I'll take all of that and then some. Give me that; I want it.” When you hear him speaking, you'll say, “That's the best I ever heard. Oh, give me that, please.” Of course, that's the Spirit working in you.

And now there's no ambiguity and fear, no apprehension, no question. Now there's no alternative. You're caught in him. And when you are so caught, there's nothing left to do but dance and rejoice. This is just fabulous. So now he's coming. He's sending his Holy Spirit in this Word to take you beyond want, beyond alternative, beyond any other possibility, to sink you so deeply in him that all you can do is sink. I love it. Give me that. That's just fabulous.

So here now is the true Advent, the true Epiphany. It's beginning here and now. He is revealing himself in his word, and he is revealing himself in his word to carry you into the new creation. You've been baptized into his death so that you can share with him a resurrection like his. And when that is being shared, the darkness ends, and there are no alternatives. Then the darkness disappears, and the light shines in the darkness, and the

darkness cannot overcome it. The darkness is shut out. What a lot of fun. You can see these texts are going to carry you a long way. This is the way to begin the new church year.

God keep you all, men and women, as you go about your calling in the wilderness, because John is standing beside you there. All the best. God's peace.

SOURCE

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Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MPJzGUNnas8>

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