

Sermon - 01/10/21
Ps 29; Gen 1:1-5; Ac 19:1-7; Mk 1:4-11
Baptism of the Lord

Here is our very first glimpse of the Creator God at work in in the formless void. There was only darkness in what was about to become a created order. The writer calls the power of God's presence "a wind...swept over the face of the waters." That wind is the Holy Spirit of God. When God spoke, the breath of God – the wind of His holy will became light. The light was separated from the darkness. Light is the only thing the Lord created that first day.

We see before us the waters – and we see the moving of the breath of the Almighty. What He speaks becomes reality. Water and the Spirit at work in creation. Water and the Spirit are at work in Holy Baptism.

When you and I think of John Baptist, we are shocked at the wildness of his appearance (he looked like the Prophet Elijah in a camel hair garment) and the strangeness of his food (locusts and wild honey). Some just stop there and think of John as a strange hermit living near the river. Let's tune our hearts to the description of the Baptist in Mark's Gospel. Mark doesn't provide any preamble – just that John the Baptizer "appeared in the wilderness." He came to bring, not a new word, but the continuing Word of God. His appearance (like a Desert Mystic) is sudden. He is proclaiming – that is he is preaching and teaching out in the deserted places around the east bank of the Jordan River. This is some distance from Jerusalem. He stayed on the other side of the river to keep off of King Herod's turf. He boldly criticized Herod for his adulterous marriage to Herodias, his sister-in-law. So, he was careful to stay out of the king's reach.

His appearance is striking, but his preaching is the thing we must home in on today. John not only proclaims baptism – he then baptizes those who wish to repent of their sins and be washed clean. Mark says there was widespread enthusiasm for John's ministry. Many (Mark says "all") people of Jerusalem were going out there to hear him. The closest access to the Jordan from the city is about 40 minutes by car in our century. It would have been a good five- or six-hour hike to get there in the 1st c AD.

John's message resonates with Isaiah's prophecy:

*³The voice of one calling out,
"Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness;
Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
⁴Let every valley be lifted up,
And every mountain and hill be made low;
And let the uneven ground become a plain,
And the rugged terrain a broad valley;
⁵Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
And all flesh will see it together;
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken." (Is 40:3-5)*

Isaiah saw John Baptist with prophetic eyes centuries before he was born. He is not calling for building an actual road or highway. Rather, the prophets are talking about opening our hearts and making a way for the justice and the transforming love of God. Our readings for today raise massive issues about how you and I fashion our lives. What is your view of the cosmos? What do you actually believe and practice when it comes to God's existence – God's power – the beginning, the middle and the end of all that we understand in the material world? What endures beyond this physical plane of existence? Isn't it surely the presence and power of our Creator God? God was here when all this began – God will be here when all this ends.

Jesus is the Holy One of Israel, yet He makes His way to the place where John is baptizing. He humbly gets in line and asks to be baptized – the God who spoke water into being is going to be washed. In that very water. Why? He does it for you and me. When He was born a human being, He was all in to live a perfect life. He shows us how it is done – how to live as a man beloved by God in the midst of a sinful world. Jesus' baptism shows His perfect obedience to His heavenly

(Continued on next page.)

Father.

Jesus goes into the water in the Old Covenant – He emerges into the New Covenant. Being under the waters of chaos means dying – and rising out of the waters of baptism means eternal life in Christ. He is the first born from the dead. And He draws all who believe in Him.

You and I are not able to lay hold of that eternal life on our own. The Holy Spirit who appeared when the sky was torn open above the Lord Jesus is the same Holy Spirit who rushes to us when we are baptized. Going under the water is the outward sign of what is truly taking place. We too, like Jesus, move from the old to the new by the grace of God through our faith in Him. Amen.