

Mark 1:4-11

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, "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. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

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The start of something new—a new year, a new job, arriving to live in a new town, the birth of a new child are often good occasions to take stock of one's life, to have a moment to look around and reconnect to the reality of what now is. In this new year, our first Sunday service together in 2018 I would like to pose us a question as the faithful Christians of St. Martin's-in-the-Field Episcopal Church: What are we called to become, to begin afresh in this place, as Christians today in 2018? This question is the basis for a series of questions that we will be asking a lot over the course of this year as we explore who we are NOW and what we are being called to BECOME as the people of God here in this corner of God's creation. God is ALWAYS creating something new, is ALWAYS moving us forward in creation so that we will become more fully who God has in mind for us to become—both as individuals and as a church.

I'd wager that the answer to that question of "what are we being called to become NOW" centers, at least in part, around the sacrament of Holy Baptism and all that Baptism includes and encompasses. Which works out nicely because today we are going to baptize three infants into the death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Even better: we have biblical text that talks about new beginnings, new life, and new ways of being. We are on a roll on this first Sunday in 2018!

In Genesis—we see the very GENESIS of creation—we have the very first "day." That first day involved Water, God, and the goodness that came from the separation of light from darkness. In our reading from Acts we have a small scene where some believers didn't know that there even WAS a baptism of Jesus. But found out full force as they experienced the transformative powers that come from belief and baptism when that baptism involves the presence of the Holy Spirit. And finally in our reading from Mark's gospel—the gospel we will journey through this lectionary year—we start off at both the beginning of the gospel itself and also the beginning of Jesus' ministry in the world. That's a whole lot of new beginnings.

In taking a look at our gospel reading however, we see a rather odd coupling of ideas, words, symbols, and events. As we will come to see again and again in Mark's gospel, this is a theme. Here are three examples where things don't seem to make a lot of sense:

Let's start with John—the one we hear about first in Mark's gospel. The gospel is about Jesus who is the main character, but instead we hear about John and what John is doing. From the start John proclaims that he ISN'T the ONE. In fact, John can't even tell us who IS the one but John who ISN'T THE ONE, baptizes Jesus who IS the one.

Next, as Jesus comes up out of the water of new birth, signifying the start of his ministry, his own NEW life, he sees the heavens being torn apart. Jesus is the only one who sees the heavens being "torn apart"—Greek: *Schizo*—from where we get our English word schism. Here's the telling oddity: The ONLY other time in all of Mark's gospel that word *schizo* appears is at the END of Jesus' life as he breathes his last in Mark 15: "Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn (*schizo*) in two, from top to bottom." (Mark 15:37-38) So from the very start of Mark's gospel the idea is put forward that baptism is linked in the end to both death...and resurrection which leads to the final odd pairing of things:

When Jesus is baptized, only Jesus hears the proclamation, the revelation, that "you are my son, the beloved." When Jesus dies—in fact the very next verse after the temple curtain is *schizo*, NOW look at who proclaims Jesus' divinity and "sonship": "Now when the CENTURION, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'" (Mark 15:39, my emphasis) A member of the hated Romans, the occupiers and oppressors of God's Holy People now proclaims out loud to all, that Jesus was God's son. We didn't see THAT one coming.

As I mentioned a moment ago, in Mark's gospel baptism and death are so closely linked. Mark is trying to show us that actually, these odd pairings or reversals of how we think things should be are part and parcel for how God works. Things that are proven to be one way...BUT, when the power of faith in God is applied, things like the conquerors proclaim the divinity of the conquered, death really means life eternal, and someone who has power to baptize and forgive sins actually readily recognizes that in fact, he ISN'T the real deal.

In our liturgy of baptism we proclaim that we are buried with Christ in his death. What that means is that we need to die to the old way of existence before we can put on, accept, and be recipients of the NEW way, the new life, the new beginning that only faith in Jesus can give us.

Here's how that works:

Old Equation: born, live, die, the end.

Add faith, baptism and Jesus and the new equation looks like this: Born, live, die which = resurrection, eternal life with God the source of all life and love. Oh, and the fact that NOTHING can separate us from the love of God for all eternity...not even death.

As part of this new beginning we have here in 2018, and one takes stock of the current state of the world and our society—one would correctly note that the levels of anxiety on a societal scale only seem to have gotten more pronounced in the last year, even the last several days. When one looks at the world into which the three infants that baptism will give their own new beginning as Christians, and who are at the start of their own lives, the world can seem like a pretty dark and scary place.

Specifically, I'm talking about the tone of public discourse that has by all accounts become more strident and course; I'm talking about things like the psychology and temperament behind the growing insistence that "I am right because I say so." I'm talking about the alarming penchant for a lack of self-accountability, a lack of self-control, and that the only truly protected class in our society are those who are offended.

I point all of these things out, but in truth, none of these are new to our society, or our world. These dark places in our world have always been there, sometimes more prominent, other times less so. I was reminded of this just the other day when I heard the following broadcast that was made 60 years ago.

[Queen's Christmas Day speech, 1957: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mBRP-o6Q85s>]

That was the voice of Queen Elizabeth II broadcasting the first TELEVISED Christmas Day Speech from Sandringham in Norfolk on Christmas Day 1957. Her televised broadcast was a new beginning for her and a new chapter in her monarchy. How little has changed in the last 60 years in terms of Elizabeth noted what was needed then in that society which, like today, seemed to have been degraded into not the best version of itself.

As has been since the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River—itsself a marker of new life, new beginnings, and new chapters—it was through those waters that the Israelites who had wandered in the desert for 40 years finally trudged through and emerged sopping wet into the Promised Land—God is, as God has always been, in the business of making new beginnings happen. In baptism that new beginning is for us who come to the waters of baptism in faith, repenting of their sins, and receiving that indissoluble forgiveness...welcomed to our new life as the very children of God, forgiven, loved, free.

In a moment as we baptize these three infants and renew our own baptismal covenant—the promises we made or that were made for us at our own baptism—I call us as the body of Christ here at St. Martin's to recommit ourselves to becoming more fully the best version of ourselves, to becoming more fully who God created us as individuals and as a worshipping body to become.

Our baptismal liturgy marks the end of the old life ("Do you renounce ... ") and the beginning of a life lived in God's grace and forgiveness. Having received those gifts we are then charged with loving our neighbor as ourselves. We are called to respect the dignity of every human being. We are commanded to love God with all our heart, body, mind and soul—and then taking that love out into the world that desperately needs to hear some Good News. We are to stand up for what is good and right and to change the world through our thoughts, our words, and our actions. All done because by God's unending love and the gift of life eternal we have nothing left to fear. There are no more dark places that can overcome the light that radiates from us through our connection our bond with Jesus, the true light of the world.

My brothers and sisters we have been bonded to Christ in his baptism...which means we have also been joined to Jesus in his death, AND in his resurrection to new life eternal.

Now is the time for us to go out into this broken and dark world and to find new ways of being the very light and love of Jesus so that we may proclaim: We are St. Martin's, God's beloved people, and in whom God is well pleased.

Amen.