

B Baptism of Our Lord 1.7.24

Mark 1:4-8

Good News: Our identity is God's beloved

If I started in the Gospel reading this morning and you thought, didn't we just read this one? You're right. The first four verses of this text are the same ones we read on December 10th when we were talking about John the Baptist. I share that because one, yes this text sounds familiar. I didn't copy and paste wrong; the lectionary really does give us overlapping texts less than a month apart. Mark is short, there's a lot of overlap. We'll read part of this text again in another month, on the First Sunday in Lent. But two because, do you remember how the text we read in Advent started, how the Gospel of Mark starts? It starts, this is verse one, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." I spent a lot of time last month going through that one verse, because there is a lot packed into it. But this morning I want you to notice just the first phrase, "The beginning of the good news." One because, it may remind you of our Old Testament reading for this morning, "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth..." but more on that later. What I really want to remind you, coming out of Christmas, and especially Luke two and its drawn out story of the announcement of Jesus' birth, is that Mark has no infancy narrative. This, Jesus' baptism, this is the beginning. There is no Angel Gabriel announcing to Mary that she would bear a child, no John leaping in Elizabeth's womb, no heavenly host singing songs to shepherds. For Mark, this is it. John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins," whatever that means, and then here comes a fully formed adult Jesus who "came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." This person, whom no one knows yet, is the one whom, "as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a

dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.'" And yes, OK, he's Jesus, he's the Son of God, the one sent by God to be both fully God and fully human, God knows who he is, what he's come to do. But, even so, he hasn't done anything yet. Jesus is nothing more than potential in human form, when the Spirit descended on him and a voice from heaven declared him God's Son, the Beloved.

And that, dear people of God, is the thing about baptism. It's not about who we are, it's about the potential God knows is in us, because we are children of God. This is one reason we baptize infants in our tradition, though I will argue children probably get baptism better than adults do, because children are used to growing into who they can be, whereas we tend to believe we are fully formed versions of ourselves. Which, pro tip, we are not. We never are. We are always, at every stage in our lives, growing, changing, learning, evolving. That is part of what makes us human. Baptism is this declaration that who we are is children of God, and everything else we do, whoever we become from there, flows out of that identity.

God is always viewing us in light of our identity. This isn't just a baptism thing; this is a God thing. Remember I pointed out the similarities between the start of Genesis and the start of Mark. They both start out, "The beginning." In Mark, the first thing that happens is Jesus showed up and got called Beloved. In Genesis, God created a whole bunch of stuff, and with every single thing God created, God "saw that it was good." Except for us, for humans, which God saw was "very good." And then pretty immediately after that, we prove to be not all that good. And the entire rest of scripture is God trying to get us back to who God knows

us to be, who God created us to be, God's good creation made from God's hand and voice in God's own image.

Dear people of God, you are God's beloved, in you God is well pleased. That is your God-given identity. Every good thing we do going forward flows from living into who we already are, and every mistake and screw up comes from forgetting or losing track of who we are. And when that happens, there is God being, no, you are this, not that. You are beloved, made good, the one in whom God is pleased. This is the identity which forms who you are and how you live and breathe and move through the world.

This is all very esoteric, and, you might be saying, idealistic. God thinks we're great, so we act great, where's the motivation in that? Let me tell you what that looks like in practice, at least in my own life. I have this friend, more like a mentor really, named Jana. I got to see her this summer while I was in Seattle, and it was great. The thing about Jana that has made her have such a major impact in my life is that Jana thinks I am a way better person than I really am. I am a pastor because Jana thought I should be. She thinks I am smart and solid and sensible, and she talks to me like those are just characteristics I possess naturally. And friends, I try to be the person Jana thinks I am. I am a better person, a better pastor, because I have spent my life trying to live up to Jana's idea of who I am. You all do this to me as well, I will tell you. I am a better pastor because you all think I'm good at this, and tell me I'm good at this, and I don't want to prove you wrong.

You do this for me, and I hope I do this for you, I hope we all do this for each other. When churches are at our best, I think we hold for each other the image of who God sees us as, who God knows us to be, and we each find ourselves living more fully into that image. Not because we have to, but because that image becomes our identity, because we know ourselves to be Beloved children of God in whom God is well-pleased, and that deep seated knowledge of who we are shapes our minds and hearts and actions.

This is why we baptize into community. Because the work of baptism is on us the gathered community. The ones present to give witness to the claims God is making on the life of the baptized, and to help that person live into that claim. When we witness a baptism, it becomes our role to remind that person of who they are, that they are God's beloved child, that God is pleased with them, exactly who and as they are, that God created them good in God's own image, and to help them believe that for themselves.

Dear people of God, in the very beginning of his earthly ministry. Before he'd done anything, when he was just a guy from Nazareth, Jesus appeared out of the waters of the Jordan to the booming declaration that he was God's son, God's beloved. And every single thing he did from that moment on, from calling disciples, to healing crowds, to teaching with authority, to casting out demons, to his very death and resurrection and ascension into glory, every single one of those actions flowed out of knowing who he was. And because of who Jesus was, because of what Jesus did with the knowledge of who he was and who's he was, you too are, exactly who you are and as you are, God's beloved. May everything you are and everything you do flow from the knowledge of that identity. That you are made in

the image of God, called good at the moment of creation, loved and beloved, and the one in whom God is well-pleased. This is who you are, not because of what you do, but because it is who God has created you to be. May everything in your life flow from that promise. You are God's beloved. Amen.