

Sermon Prepared by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes for Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
First Sunday after The Epiphany, January 10, 2021

(Mark 1:4-11)

I began this morning's sermon early in the week. It was one of those times when thoughts flowed early and quickly, and I immediately set about putting my notes down on paper.

(As an aside it's interesting that I noted the early parts of the writing process were *quick* and *immediate*, as they are direct albeit unintended reflections of the pacing of Mark. Mark is a gospel of immediacy ... a gospel of rapid transition ... a gospel of quick changes in place and scene. In verse 10 for example we read, "And just as he was coming out of the water." This is a translation of the Greek word *euthys*, literally meaning "at once" or "immediately" and variations of which are used 47 times throughout Mark.¹ Professor of New Testament Mark Strauss considered the pacing and use of that word when he referred to Mark as "a Gospel on steroids!"²)

At any rate, the writing was going quickly. But that was Tuesday.

Sermon writing and just about everything else were cast aside as the events in Washington unfolded on Wednesday afternoon with a haste and speed reminiscent of the speed of this Gospel. A great deal has been said and offered in the hours and days since about what took place: reports and commentaries; blame and attempts at justification; press releases and interviews; and especially powerful messages from both clergy and lay leaders. Anything else I try to articulate this morning about that afternoon in the nation's capital would undoubtedly be repetitive of much of what has already been said. I can say that it was a particularly emotional time for me – a time of anger, and fear, and the shedding of many tears – as I watched the violence and destruction occurring in the rooms and corridors of a place where I worked for many years ... a place where I learned and experienced much ... a place where friendships were built that continue to this day. In the end what I *did* feel *had* to be said in those first hours was spoken in the words of The Great Litany that many of us prayed together through a live stream that evening.

Moving from that day into the latter stages of the week I tried – in vain, it often seemed – to try and tie the scene of Jesus' baptism together with what had taken place just 90 or so miles from here. How do you link the descent of the Holy Spirit together with the descent into chaos? After stepping away and taking some time to consider it I realized one key part of this passage was shifting my focus and capturing my attention. The change came in re-reading the first three words of verse nine: "In those days." They are words in the past tense, a moment that came and went 2,000 years ago. But a careful reading of all of the final three verses reveals a combination of past and present tense ... a mixture of finite moments and infinite realities.

In *those* days. Jesus *was* baptized. After the baptism Jesus *saw* the heavens torn apart. A voice calling out 'You *are* my Son.' The words of the Gospel writer set down in this narrative

¹ John R. Donahue, S.J., and Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 65, n. 10.

² Mark Strauss, "The Gospel of the Servant-Messiah: The Unique Purpose of the Gospel of Mark." BibleProject, <https://bibleproject.com/blog/mark-gospel-servant-messiah/>.

moment were cast in the past tense. It was the voice of God alone here that speaks in the present. You *are* my Son.

Much of this passage would have been quite familiar to the earliest followers of Jesus as a reiteration and reshaping of familiar words from even further back in scripture ... other moments in which we find past and present intersecting, with glimpses of the future. From Psalm 2 for instance we find, “I *will* tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, “You *are* my son; *today* I have begotten you.”³ From Ezekiel we find “[T]he heavens *were* opened,”⁴ and in Isaiah, “O that you *would* tear open the heavens and come down.”⁵ We also find a continuation of this theme elsewhere in Isaiah, “Here *is* my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he *will* bring forth justice to the nations.”⁶

Past, present and future: each is found threading its way through the passage from Mark and in the older tradition on which it draws. But returning to those first three words I mentioned earlier from verse nine, in *those* days, it does beg the question: What about *these* days? We saw where Jesus came 2,000 years ago and what the voice of God said to him; where is Jesus coming to us *today*, and what is the voice of God saying to us *today*?

These questions are at the foundation of what I talked about last week ... the encouragement for everyone to live as the Epiphany star guiding others to this place. For a light or lamp to work, there has to be electricity or oil; for a candle to burn there must first be a match to ignite the wick. Stars are illuminated because of an incredible internal physical process that creates energy; what is the holy internal process that powers you and creates your light?

So putting yourself in the position of being that light, consider what is powering you ... what match has been struck within you. To do that, I invite you to begin with the words of God, the words that will forever be in the present tense. When they were spoken in Mark, the only one who heard them was Jesus; they were an affirmation to the Son from the Father. Consider those words and how they might be spoken as an affirmation to you: “You *are my Child*, the Beloved; with *you* I am well pleased.” Do you sense the striking of a match to you, the candle?

In Mark the heavens were torn apart before God spoke, a traditional symbolic portrayal of communication between the divine and the human.⁷ Just as the Spirit descended on Jesus, it has descended on you. Reflect on this passage and consider a tearing of the heavens in your life; do you sense it opening up communication with God and giving you the candle the sacred oxygen needed to burn?

Regardless of any difference in views, Wednesday was a dark, emotionally fraught, painful day for all of us. Instead of the heavens being torn apart, we experienced a part of our national fabric fraying. Instead of a dove – a symbol of peace – coming down, it was anger, passion and outrage rising up. Instead of the light of a new year brightening the world we

³ Psalm 2:7 (NRSV).

⁴ Ezekiel 1:1 (NRSV).

⁵ Isaiah 64:1 (NRSV).

⁶ Isaiah 42:1 (NRSV).

⁷ Ibid.

saw instead a bit more darkness covering the land. In that context I want you to consider my earlier question: where is Jesus in *these* days? Then take the next step: ponder what powers you – what it is from God that causes your light to shine – and turn that light as a beacon to the world.

Shine your light as a spotlight drawing others to this place, a place that like the waters of the Jordan transformed Jesus may transform all those who wade into the waters of the Church. Share the words of Jesus with those with whom you agree and love and, as hard as it may be, with those with whom you disagree and hold animosity: *you are God's child, the beloved.*

In the midst of the darkness, be a lamp of hope. In the midst of chaos, be a source of calm. In a land parched by division, be a river that refreshes and renews. Above all, do what may be the most difficult thing of all: *love; love; love.* We may not want to do it, but we are *tasked by God* to do it. We are *compelled by the very words of Jesus* to do it.

If we are to help answer the question of where Jesus is in these days – if we are to bring healing and hope to a troubled world – love is something we *must do* and most assuredly something we *must be*.

Let me conclude with the words of our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry:

I would ask you to do two things. I'm asking you to make a commitment, a renewed commitment, to live the way of love as Jesus has taught us and to do it by making a commitment to go out and bless somebody. Bless somebody you disagree with. Bless somebody you agree with. But go out and bless somebody by helping somebody along the way. Go out and bless somebody by listening to their story and their life. To go out and be an instrument of God's peace, an agent of God's love.⁸

Amen.

⁸ The Most Rev. Michael Curry, "Presiding Bishop Curry's Word to the Church: Who Shall We Be?" Episcopal Church Office of Public Affairs, <https://episcopalchurch.org/posts/publicaffairs/presiding-bishop-currys-word-church-who-shall-we-be>.