

+Baptism of the Lord+

January 7, 2018

Mark 1:4-11

The Rev. Carenda Baker – Trinity Episcopal Church, Chambersburg

Baptism of Elizabeth Cathryn Shively

Can you believe it - the 12 days of Christmas are once more a memory? The Christ child has been born. The angels have delivered the message of good news. We've sung the carols, baked the cookies, decked the halls. Now all the strings of lights and the window candles, along with the ornaments, have been stowed from whence they came. The creche is back in its well-worn box, tucked away in the upstairs closet on the top shelf. As of yesterday, January 6th, the feast of the Epiphany, the wise men from the East have followed a star, visited the boy king, left expensive gifts, and are headed home by a different road. For most of us here, this is pretty much how the story of Christmas unfolds each year, the familiar way, with the lovely traditions we celebrate, based on the stories from the gospels of Matthew and Luke.

But in the gospel of Mark? There are none of those features of the Christmas story with which we are most comfortable, and know so well. No baby. No parents. No angels, no shepherds come to see the "great thing that has taken place". No jealous and insecure king on the throne, hunting down the holy family because he feels threatened.

No big cast of characters for Mark. Mark's is the "no nonsense" gospel. It is an urgent, sort of insistent "in your face", get things done gospel. Mark's gospel opens: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus, the Son of God." And then it describes a messenger sent to prepare the way. Mark's Christmas story begins with two men. First is the rough, wild-looking man, last of the great prophets, John, out in the wilderness, listening to people's confessions, and baptizing them in the river Jordan. And then appears an adult Jesus, come out there to be baptized by John, too. There is no sweetness or nostalgia for Mark, no back story or genealogy of Jesus.

In Mark, Jesus enters the world scene humbly, stepping into the chilly water, the same river where troubled, struggling, desperate yet hopeful people are coming to be baptized by John. Mark's beginning is really about Jesus' inauguration, the launch of his ministry. It may not be calm and soothing like Luke's story, but it is no less gripping, and may be even more compelling than the familiar story of the birth of the babe in Bethlehem.

Jesus walks into the water a fully grown man. Coming up out of the water, Jesus alone sees the heavens "torn open". Mark's word choice is intentional and very telling. The clouds do not simply part. It is not a gentle separation of heaven from earth. It is a

harsh “rending”, a tearing. The Greek word for “torn open” is “schizo”, from the same root as our words “schism” and “schizophrenic”. “Heavens torn open”. Mark wants us to understand from the outset the lengths to which God will go in order to come down to be among us, with us, one of us. God will not be separated any longer from that which God has created and loves.

The Spirit descends upon Jesus, and probably not so gently as it appears on today’s worship bulletin cover. It might actually have been more like being dive-bombed by the dove, feeling the power in those wings as the Spirit swoops down and hovers near him, the great “*whoosh*” of air on his face, so unexpected that he sways back and forth for a moment as he stands there dripping wet, knee-deep in the Jordan. And then the voice, for Jesus’ ears alone to hear: ***“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”*** This is total acceptance and affirmation of who Jesus is. There is no mistaking his identity. He is flesh and bone, born of the one, holy God. Precious in God’s sight, held next to God’s heart. A son receiving blessing. And God’s promise of commitment to be with him. For Mark, Jesus’ baptism is a sign of his willingness to do what God has sent him to do – to heal, to cast out evil, to save by serving and giving away his very life. Jesus’ will and God’s will are in harmony. There is deep peace, and there is resolve. Jesus knows who he is, and what his mission in life is to be. We can only imagine how many times in his ministry Jesus would remember his baptism, hear again those words “You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased”, once more find the courage to continue his difficult journey to the cross.

Baptism marks a new beginning. For us and for Elizabeth, baptism is a day of new beginnings. Baptism is our birthday as Christians – the day we become “little Christs”, through the promises we make or which are made on our behalf by our parents and godparents. Baptism is a gift that begins with God’s grace, God active in us and for us long before we are aware of it. We call on the Holy Spirit to come down and stir up in our hearts the recognition that we, too, are sons and daughters of God. This is our identity. We declare and affirm it in Word, water, oil, bread and wine. Baptism is the sacrament, the outward and visible sign of being welcomed into a new community, a new family in whom God is at work through the death and resurrection of Christ. Baptism marks in calendar time our pledging loyalty to Christ, the day that through water and the Spirit we die and rise with Christ to brand new life. The day we start to learn what it means to share the light and love of Christ in the world.

There is power and drama in what we witness and do here today. Elizabeth’s baptism and our reaffirmation of baptism might just get us wet. Or it might just change our lives.

In baptism, God speaks words that we all long to hear – words of acceptance, identity, blessing, and commitment. It will take the rest of our lives to grow into these words, to understand that they are real, trustworthy, and true. Every time we worship, by faith we remind each other that God keeps God's promises to be with us, and for us. The discipline of worship is vital, because there are so many other things in the world that clamor to define us, to tell us who we are, and who or what we should worship – things like wealth, intellect, power, popularity, and privilege.

A brand new year lies before us. Decisions will be made. Relationships will begin and end. Career changes may become necessary. Illness will be endured, challenges surmounted, risks taken, adventure dared, love shared. In the midst of all that may come in 2018, we need grounding, a point of spiritual focus. We need words of encouragement we can speak often to each other. Reflecting on today's baptism, I offer first a few simple thoughts for Meghan and Nick, Elizabeth's parents, and then a few related thoughts for the rest of us - Elizabeth's extended family, both biological and spiritual.

The truth is, it can be very difficult to live as a follower of Jesus. And it is always challenging call to be a parent, especially a parent wanting to raise your child to embrace and live into the Christian faith. Meghan and Nick, you will need the support of others. Do not be afraid to ask for it.

I offer you 3 tips for your adventure ahead:

1. Remember that you two were a couple, before you became three. Do try to care for yourselves as a couple, even while you're immersed and excited about learning all that it means to be parents.
2. One of the best gifts you can give to your daughter is to grow in your own relationship with God – individually, together as a couple, and as a young family. The simplest place to begin is by praying together, and reading stories from Scripture together at home.
3. The 3rd suggestion is to pray and ask God to lead you to a faith community where you will be nurtured and fed, learn, grow, and serve together. We will always be delighted to have you join us at Trinity when you come to Chambersburg. Putting down roots and establishing yourselves in a home church will take some work, and it will be worth it, for it is clear you want to be rooted and grounded in God's love, and that means being rooted in a faith community.

And now a few reflections for Elizabeth's extended biological family and all of us, her spiritual family.

1. Celebrate Elizabeth's baptismal day! Take pictures, jot down things you want to remember, write her a note or send a keepsake card. A year from now, bring out

and light the baptismal candle Elizabeth will receive today. Show the pictures, read the notes/cards. Every year on January 7th throw a “remember your baptism” party! As Elizabeth gets a bit older, tell her what this day was like and what it means for her and for you.

2. For those of us present who have been baptized, we, too, need to celebrate the date of our baptism, at least as much, if not more so than our physical birthday. If you don't know if or when you were baptized, do some detective work and learn what you can - the who, what, where, when, of your baptism. For anyone here who has not been baptized, I invite you to speak to me or another trusted clergy person, a family member or friend about what baptism means – why we do it and why it is important. God will provide people eager to help you learn and explore this sacrament.
3. Pray often for Elizabeth and her parents Meghan and Nick – that they be given wisdom, courage, a good sense of humor, patience, robust health, forgiveness, gratitude, faithfulness, and a deep awareness of God's love.
4. Let us tell stories to each other, and one day soon, share them with Elizabeth. Let's tell each other the stories about what brings us joy, hope, and strength to persevere and endure life's adversities. Let's tell the stories about the people who have shown us the light and love of Christ. Let's share those stories about the ones who have helped us meet Jesus, stories where we glimpse God at work in the world, even through us.

God declared to Jesus at his baptism: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Take those words into your mind and heart for all time, because God speaks them over and over to each one of us – “You are my son, the beloved, my daughter the beloved. With you I am well pleased”. Let those words stir in your spirit wonder and awe. Let them bring you joy, and hope, and strength. Let those words enfold you, change you, and bring you new life. God has already done the work for us in Jesus, the risen Christ. The best response we can offer is, “Thank you, God” - “I love you, Lord” - “Help me follow you”. This is what we need to show and tell, to teach dear Elizabeth - the best response to the God who created and loves her, who calls her by name as God's very own is “Thank you, God. I love you. Help me follow you Lord.”

AMEN.