

“QUITE A DAY AT THE JORDAN”

Mark 1:4-11; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7

**Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

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In the next town over from me when I was in Jamestown, there was a Presbyterian pastor who called the members of her congregation “beloveds.” Kelly and I, following Christ’s prescription in John 15, often call you friends. I usually begin my articles and columns in the newsletter and midweek email by writing, “Dear Market Square Members and Friends.” But Leslie always wrote, “Dear Beloveds.” To tell the truth, I always thought it sounded odd. But after spending the week with our gospel story about the baptism of our Lord, I have to admit it is growing on me. So I speak this morning to my “dear beloveds.”

To use the word “beloveds” makes good pastoral sense because I am irretrievably, undeniably, irrefutably, indisputably, and indubitably convinced that until a person comes to the awareness that he or she is beloved of God, that person cannot live into the fullness of his or her life. Until we experience a breakthrough into joy that comes only from knowing that God is the center of life, that God is the greatest reality with whom we have first and last to do,¹ that God is the One in whom we live and move and have our entire and eternal being,² and that this God calls us “beloved,” our lives are only shadows of what we can be. To know that we are beloved of God, beloveds, ought to make a profound difference in our lives.

In case you had not noticed, at the advent of Advent last month we entered into a new lectionary year, the year of Mark. Mark does not begin his telling of the gospel with a story about the birth of Jesus. No Christmas nativity in Mark. The beginning of the gospel for Mark is the baptism of

¹ Revelation 22:13

² Acts 17:28

Jesus,³ the account of the breakthrough into joy for Jesus, the occasion at which Jesus “heard” the voice of God say to him, *“You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well-pleased.”*⁴

My own breakthrough into joy did not come in a single moment but over the period of time of my adolescence. I had a fairly typical high school experience, I think. I was a good student outside of my debacle with calculus. I had friends and, surprisingly, even a girlfriend! I played in a well-traveled high school band. I had a few modest sports successes. But also I was shy. I often felt I did not measure up when I compared myself to others. I was self-conscious. There were many things I did not try for fear I would embarrass myself. Thus, I missed out on a lot of things that, as I later watched my daughters live through their high school years, I wished I had done.

One of the greatest gifts my parents gave to me as I was growing up was the family practice of attending church every Sunday. We belonged to a Presbyterian church in downtown York, Pennsylvania and it was there in Sunday School I first developed friendships with people who did not look like me, whose skin was a different hue than mine, who came from different social and economic experiences and different national origins. I met the world at church.

Every Sunday, these friends and I learned about God together and talked about the varied circumstances of our lives - Isaac and Shawn who lived in the inner city and Dan and Jim who were physicians’ sons, Melinda who was even more shy than I, and kinder, and Laurie who I always was trying to date and succeeded once and Tom who died in a plane crash a few years ago and Craig and Patty and Gary and so many others.

But it was in the sanctuary, in worship, that the heavens really opened for me like I imagine they did for Jesus on his baptism day. That was where God became real to me and after years of hearing my pastors preach about the kind of love and life Jesus lived, it finally dawned on me that while *“God so loved the world,”*⁵ God also loved me. And while God loved me, *“God so loved the world.”* I became convinced the words Jesus heard God say to him – *“You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well-pleased”* – God says to all of us.

It was the breakthrough I needed at that time in my life and the discovery that has carried me ever since through both rocky terrain and smoother ground. Because I am convinced that God loves me, I could hear those devastating words, “Katy’s dead,” and know that no matter how deep the abyss of grief, underneath are the Everlasting Arms. Because I am convinced that God loves me, I never felt as if I needed to make a name for myself but can seek in my life to do those

³ Mark 4:9-11

⁴ Mark 4:11

⁵ John 3:16

things, albeit far from perfectly, the Lord requires of us - “justice, kindness, humility.”⁶ Because I am convinced God loves me, I also am certain God loves others, too, loves them as much as I am loved and that all are given to me as brothers and sisters in one human family. Therefore, I am free to love and not hate, lift up and not pull down, reconcile and not divide.

As Jesus was coming up out of his baptismal waters, Mark says Jesus “*saw the heavens open.*” He saw “*the Spirit of God descend like a dove on him.*” “*He heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’*” It was quite at day at the Jordan! Tim Birney and Cathy Becker just returned from a trip to Palestine and brought back with them both a photo and a pint of water from the Jordan at the spot where it is believed Jesus was baptized. It is dirty, muddy water and the mighty Jordan is not much wider there than a creek. It was a great day at the Jordan not because the Jordan is great but because God is.

God provided a breakthrough experience for Jesus. It was the moment when Jesus threw wide open the door of his heart on which God had been knocking so persistently. It was the time for Jesus when life began to cohere and come together, when Jesus discerned the divine purpose for his life. Mark tells us that almost immediately after the heavens opened for Jesus, he went into the desert to pray, to ponder, to struggle with how best to answer and to live God’s call on his life.⁷ It is what we do across a lifetime.

From our vantage point two thousand years later, we know a lot about how Jesus responded. He lived his life powerfully attuned to the preaching of the prophets. He lived his life with unbridled compassion and ceaseless mercy. He lived his life with so much love and freedom the early church said, “God is like Jesus.” The church didn’t say, “Jesus is like God” but “God is like Jesus.” Jesus himself became the “open heavens” for people who had come to wonder whether God had abandoned them.

The Jewish community believed the heavens might have closed. They remembered the stories of Abraham and Sarah, of Moses and Miriam and Joshua, Elijah, King David, Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. But for three or four hundred years, there had been no great prophets, no great lawgivers, no great singers of new songs, no obvious outpouring of the Spirit, no new word from God. Life seemed to them as stagnant as a pond on a humid day. It seemed bereft of God and joy and hope.

But, in Jesus, the heavens were opened again! A breakthrough! Jesus was not a new God, but a new incarnation of the God who was and is and is to come. Jesus sparked a movement for justice in the land and hope in the heart. Jesus was not a new God, but he brought a new word.

⁶ Micah 6:8

⁷ Mark 1:12-13

*“You have heard it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...”*⁸ *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*⁹ *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”*¹⁰ When her accusers brought a woman caught in adultery for judgment according to the law, Jesus said, *“Let whoever is without sin cast the first stone.”*¹¹ God was not gone into the far heavens as some people had supposed; rather, in Jesus, the heavens were opened and God was made known in a new way.

Some people question the presence of God in our world today and in our lives. How can God be here and yet there be so much suffering and tragedy of the kind experienced every day in places like Palestine and Venezuela and Sudan and on our own city streets? How can God be here when our politics grow so crude and partisan at the expense of peoples’ needs? How can God be here when it seems that weapons not only are not being turned into plowshares but are becoming ever more sophisticated? Is this a time when the heavens are closed and God is far removed, leaving us to our own ruinous devices and ways?

Hear the good news of the gospel: The heavens are not closed. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ continues to be for us the breakthrough, the “aha” moment, the divine wisdom that tells us we are God’s “beloveds” and that the way of Jesus is the way of God in the world, and thus the way for us. We are not and this world is not bereft of God’s care, compassion, love, or direction. We are not and this world is not, drifting or aimless, clueless or hopeless.

Rather, in Christ, God continues to gather and to send into the world what last week we called the baptized “community of resistance” who employs the loving, redeeming, freeing ways of God we see in Jesus. The gospel needs ambassadors¹² (to use St. Paul’s good word). Christ needs followers. God desires disciples and practitioners of the way Jesus lived:

loving those who on the surface may seem unlovable;
standing with sinners and befriending the brokenhearted;
refusing to perpetrate or participate in violence;
showing mercy endlessly and forgiving relentlessly;
trusting God and not mammon.

⁸ Matthew 5:43-44

⁹ Matthew 5:3

¹⁰ Matthew 5:9

¹¹ John 8:7

¹² 2 Corinthians 5:20

Jesus is for us the open heavens, the descending dove, a voice of God speaking love. Jesus is God's ongoing invitation to us to know ourselves as "beloveds" and to know that God continues to provide a way for us and the world to live in love and good will.

But we cannot know it from afar. We cannot know it as spectators. We cannot know it if we offer only half our heart. There is something happening at Market Square these days. Do you sense it, too? The Spirit is favoring us but with that favor comes responsibility. I call on our congregation this year, this church of "beloveds," to let 2018 be a breakthrough year for us in our collective and individual journeys, a defining year in which, knowing ourselves to be beloved of God, we commit our baptized lives and our baptized life together to the living of the radical, reconciling, resisting call of the gospel.

Because things like *this* still are happening: This week at a meeting on immigration our president allegedly said, "Why are we having people from all of these s---hole countries come here?"¹³ I confess here that we are liturgically off a week. Last Sunday was really, officially, the Baptism of the Lord but we were celebrating Epiphany last Sunday because Epiphany was really on the Saturday before last Sunday but I didn't want us to miss it and I didn't want us to miss Baptism of the Lord, either. (Got that? ☺)

But if we had skipped over one of them and were "on track," our gospel reading today would have included the following exchange between Philip and Nathanael as they were being called by Jesus to become disciples. Philip immediately said yes to the invitation of the Lord and went to tell Nathanael about Jesus of Nazareth, to which Nathanael responded, "*Can anything good come out of that s---hole Nazareth?*"¹⁴ To which Philip said, "*Come and see, Nathanael. Come and see the Lord.*" To so dismiss the people of Haiti, El Salvador, the African nations, or any nation because they are not deemed worthy of every human consideration and dignity is to dismiss also the Christ who hails from Nazareth, to cast a pall over the work of Dr. King, and to belittle the dream of the Beloved Community. The community of resistance Christ calls into being cannot allow such an attitude to stand wherever it occurs.

Dear members and friends. No! Dear "Beloveds": In the baptism of the Lord, we see God's grace poured out on him. In our baptisms, we see the grace of our Lord poured out on us. We are baptized into that grace to become the church of Jesus Christ for the sake of doing the gospel in the world. May this knowledge comfort us, challenge us, guide us, and lead us, all, into peace. Amen.

¹³ Reported remarks made by President Donald J. Trump at a conference meeting with Senators and House Representatives on January 12, 2018, cited in many news sources

¹⁴ John 1:43-51

