

Genesis 1:1-5 and Mark 1:4-11

I didn't get to preach about the Magi, this year...they must be still wandering around out there following the star! We went from the nativity to Jesus being celebrated in the temple with Simeon and Anna...and now we are talking about Jesus' baptism when he was all grown up...what happened to the Kings? Thank goodness we DID include them in our pageant *and* our Christmas Eve service... even though yesterday, January 6<sup>th</sup>, is the traditional day to remember these wise ones...Anyway, I had to give them a nod, but now we are moving on!

Let us be in prayer: God of Blessing, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together, be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen

John the Baptist is pictured as a kind of wild man but somehow, people flocked to him from all over the countryside. And almost as an aside, it says, "John was dressed with camel's hair, a leather belt and ate locusts and wild honey!" Why?

I discovered that in 2 Kings chapter 1 verse 8, it describes Elijah, the prophet who was to return and herald the coming of God's Messiah, like this: "He was hairy with a leather belt around his waist!"

So when the writers of the Gospels needed someone to claim Jesus as the Messiah... they dressed John the Baptist up in camel skins with a leather belt... We think John was Jewish and Elizabeth's son, making him a cousin of Jesus, but he was certainly a character who boldly stepped out of the traditions of the faith. Marcus Borg said he had no institutional standing, that he was an anti-establishment figure! (No wonder Jesus was attracted to him!)

In his wildness, John called people to repent...turn back from sinful ways...turn to God in their hearts... Marcus Borg says the word repent in Greek meant to "return to the way of the Lord...but also at its root could mean, 'to go beyond the mind that you have'...repent: to go beyond, to stretch, to give yourself a "fresh start!"

John's roll was to point to Jesus, telling people to look at him, because Jesus would baptize not just with water, but with the Holy Spirit! John baptizes Jesus and then we have this incredible scene that happens just after. It is a private moment when Jesus comes up out of the water. "He saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him."

So often we think of Baptism as a sweet ritual with the blessing of babies from a lovely baptismal font...and the baby is dressed in white satin baptismal clothes! But perhaps it is way more dramatic than that!

Look at the baptism of Jesus! He wasn't a baby, but a grown man. It says that when Jesus came up out of the water...."the heavens were *torn* apart!" Do you remember when the curtain of the temple was *torn apart* at the time of Jesus' crucifixion? So this is dramatic, at Jesus' baptism the heavens are *torn open*....and from out of the heavens comes the Holy Spirit...LIKE a dove.

Another commentator, Elton Brown calls it a "dive-bombing Holy Spirit!" The dove seems to be dive-bombing in my image....Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit and then we hear God's voice. 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' " How do you imagine the voice of God...is it male, female...is it soft like a whisper...is it a singing voice, or more of an overwhelming sensation of love, perhaps? How do you hear God tell you that you are also beloved...even in spite of everything??

Imagine being baptized in this way... coming up out of water.....like a birth...with these words in your heart...turning back to God....turning once again to the Source of your very Being... to that empowering Christ-Spirit, breaking out from the staleness of your own thinking, to move beyond....in God! A fresh start! What a baptism!

Elton Brown says that this is an earthy story...a "reminder that the gospel is down to earth, grounded in the real, tactile, sensual, fleshy world....and it gives us a hedge against faith and worship that sometimes gets too ethereal and abstract!"

Kathryn Matthews suggests that perhaps we clean things up too much in church...God *is* dramatic and perhaps we make our rituals so nice that "we neglect to mention *the uncomfortable implications of inviting God's Spirit to invade our lives!*"

Oh, my....God? What are you trying to tell us here? If we truly invite your Holy Spirit to invade our lives...what does that mean for us? How we will be energized in the Infinite Love that is You?

Perhaps remembering our baptism, inspires a new identity in us ...one of beloved-ness and challenge... emboldened to live out the mission of compassion, love and forgiveness... generosity, integrity and honesty? Borg says, "This story places Jesus...right in the midst of a renewal movement that was already underway." ...A renewal movement.....

Whoa, this is the third or fourth time in a matter of weeks that I have heard a call for a new movement! One from Rev. William Barber who calls us to renew our deepest religious values to start a "Poor People's Campaign" after the one Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had... and another is from Jim Wallis of Sojourner Magazine in an article that Nancy just sent me. He thinks that right now, neither political party advocates for the "least of these" for those on the margins and for those who are treated unjustly. He is asking people to renew a commitment to Matthew 25, when Jesus claimed that when we care for those most in need, we also care for him. Jesus preached compassion and justice for the oppressed...over and over....and how do we respond?

What would a "renewal movement" mean for you, for us? As we remember our own baptism and blessing... let us hold this question in our hearts as we take part in the other sacred ritual of the church...Holy Communion....where perhaps God longs for us to engage in some fresh ways...with the Holy Spirit who calls us to compassion.

Amen.