

North Kildonan United Church

10th January 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

“The Baptism of Jesus”

Genesis 1: 1-5

Acts 19: 1-7

Mark 1: 4-11

Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

"In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan." Does it seem at all strange to you that Mark would jump so quickly over the first thirty years of Jesus' life? Last Sunday in Matthew we heard of the coming of the wise men to offer their gifts to the baby Jesus. After that event, Matthew tells of the flight to Egypt by the Holy Family, which was caused by Herod's intention to murder the newborn King. Matthew concludes that chapter by describing Herod's massacre of the infants of Bethlehem, and after Herod's death, of the Holy Family returning to Judea and settling in Nazareth.

But Mark has none of that; no angels, no shepherds, no wise men, and no manger. The first appearance of Jesus in Mark's gospel is his baptism by John, when Jesus was 30 years old.

John's ministry had started before Jesus's and was obviously very significant, because all the gospel writers see it as necessary to give some sort of explanation of how Jesus emerged from John's movement and how the two related to one another. We have a movement centred around John, but then after he baptizes Jesus there is a change over and in John's own words, he decreases and Jesus increases.

John was a rough and ready, wild kind of guy. He lived a radical ascetic lifestyle, living in the desert, wearing beggar's clothes and eating locusts and wild honey. He preached a fiery message of the wrath of God and the coming judgment on a sinful generation. He called people back to a radical obedience to the Torah, the Hebrew Bible, and threatened the fiery anger of God on those who didn't repent and obey. He baptized those who responded to his message as a final sign of the conversion of all Israel, of the beginning of the reign of God. Jesus recognises and affirms John's message. His own message is different but he identifies himself with John's message by coming to him for baptism along with all the rest.

Jesus comes to John to be baptized. And in that act of baptism, Jesus's whole journey through life takes on a new direction.

Immediately after his baptism Jesus is tempted to abandon that new direction, but he rejects the lies of the devil. Within a chapter or so people quit their jobs to follow him, people bring the sick from all over the country to be healed by him, and crowds gather on a mountainside to listen to his message. In a short period of time he's got the

religious authorities up in arms accusing him of blasphemy, and then plotting to kill him, and within three years of his baptism there's been a conspiracy to have him tried on false charges and he's tortured and executed. All quite a dramatic impact for gentle carpenter from Nazareth.

So what happened to Jesus at his baptism? Mark tells us that when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*"

Others baptized by John may have experienced the forgiveness of sins at this moment, but what Jesus experienced was the gift of the Holy Spirit of God. He saw the Spirit of God descending and alighting on him. This is the same Spirit of God found in the first sentence of Genesis, brooding over the formless earth, like a mother bird over her egg, cherishing it and willing it to life. This is the Spirit who broods over each one of us, cherishing us and willing us to fullness of life. This is the Spirit who is the active creative power of God in the world, who calls and guides and loves us into the paths of God, who calls us to live life and to create life and to redeem life and to enhance life and to protect life.

The fruits of Jesus' experience of the Spirit can be seen in the stories of the gospel. He was a changed man from this moment on, a man on a mission, a man determined to bring the message of an intimate, merciful, healing, liberating God to people in need, even if it cost him his life.

It's no coincidence that our first reading should be from the first verses of Genesis. Genesis is about the beginning of creation, and the baptism of Jesus is about the beginning of the new creation Christ brings to the world. The Spirit that hovered over the waters in Genesis is the same Spirit that hovered over the waters of Jesus's baptism, proclaiming him to be God's son, the one who we know to be the Light of the World.

James Weldon Johnson, an African American poet of the early 20th Century and composer of the great freedom hymn, *Lift Every Heart and Sing*, imagines Creation this way in his wonderful poem, "*The Creation*".

*And God stepped out on space,
And he looked around and said:
I'm lonely—I'll make me a world.
And far as the eye of God could see
Darkness covered everything,
Blacker than a hundred midnights
Down in a cypress swamp.
Then God smiled,
And the light broke,
And the darkness rolled up on one side,*

*And the light stood shining on the other,
And God said: That's good!*

*Then God reached out and took the light in his hands,
And God rolled the light around in his hands
Until he made the sun;
And he set that sun a-blazing in the heavens.
And the light that was left from making the sun
God gathered it up in a shining ball
And flung it against the darkness,
Spangling the night with the moon and stars.
Then down between
The darkness and the light
He hurled the world;
And God said: That's good!*

*Then God himself stepped down—
And the sun was on his right hand,
And the moon was on his left;
The stars were clustered about his head,
And the earth was under his feet.
And God walked, and where he trod
His footsteps hollowed the valleys out
And bulged the mountains up.
Then he stopped and looked and saw
That the earth was hot and barren.
So God stepped over to the edge of the world
And he spat out the seven seas—
He batted his eyes, and the lightnings flashed—
He clapped his hands, and the thunders rolled—
And the waters above the earth came down,
the cooling waters came down.*

*Then the green grass sprouted,
And the little red flowers blossomed,
The pine tree pointed his finger to the sky,
And the oak spread out his arms,
The lakes cuddled down in the hollows of the ground,
And the rivers ran down to the sea;
And God smiled again,
And the rainbow appeared,
And curled itself around his shoulder.*

*Then God raised his arm and he waved his hand
Over the sea and over the land,
And he said: Bring forth! Bring forth!
And quicker than God could drop his hand,
Fishes and fowls
And beasts and birds
Swam the rivers and the seas,
Roamed the forests and the woods,
And split the air with their wings.
And God said: That's good!*

*Then God walked around,
And God looked around
On all that he had made.
He looked at his sun,
And he looked at his moon,
And he looked at his little stars;
He looked on his world
With all its living things,
And God said: I'm lonely still.*

*Then God sat down—
On the side of a hill where he could think;
By a deep, wide river he sat down;
With his head in his hands,
God thought and thought,
Till he thought: I'll make me a man!
Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river
He kneeled him down;
And there the great God Almighty
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
Who flung the stars
to the most far corner of the night,
Who rounded the earth
in the middle of his hand;
This great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay*

*Till he shaped it in is his own image;
Then into it he blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul. Amen.*

~The Creation by [James Weldon Johnson](#), 1871–1938

Amen.

A PRAYER

O Christ, you humbled yourself and received baptism at the hands of your friend and cousin, John, showing us the way of humility; help us to follow you, and never to be encumbered with pride.

O Christ, by your baptism, you took our humanity into the cleansing waters; give us new birth, and lead us into life as sons and daughters of God.

O Christ, by your baptism the material world became charged with your holiness; make us instruments of your transformation in this our world.

O Christ, by your baptism you revealed the Trinity, your Father calling you his beloved Son, and the Spirit descending upon you like a dove; renew our worship, rededicate us in the spirit of our baptism, and mould us into our true nature, in the image of God.

For your love's sake. Amen.