

The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
The Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord – January 7, 2018
Mark 1:4-11

Some time back, I read an interesting article in a magazine that I subscribe to. In it, the editors of the magazine asked various authors, writers, and theologians to summarize and proclaim the gospel in seven words. As you can imagine, there were a wide range of responses, each highlighting different aspects of the gospel message. Some were tinged with ironic humor, like: “God, through Jesus Christ, welcomes you anyhow.” Some stressed our human nature’s tendency toward rebellion: “In Christ, God’s yes defeats our no.” Some were more mystical: “Christ’s humanity occasions our divinity.” While others showed a more complicated theology, like this one from Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann: “Israel’s God’s bodied love continues world-making,” to which he then added the side-note, “I only used six words; I rested on the seventh.”

One of these mini-proclamations of the gospel especially caught my attention. Lutheran pastor and author, Nadia Bolz-Weber wrote: “We are who God says we are.” She elaborated on this statement writing; “in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ, we see that God is so for-us and with-us that we can no longer be defined according to death, a religion-based worthiness system, or even the categories of late-stage capitalism. ... We are who God says we are: the forgiven, broken, and blessed children of God; the ones to whom God draws near.”¹

We are the forgiven, broken, and blessed children of God; the ones to whom God draws near.

This is a special day in the life of the church because today, we celebrate the feast of the Baptism of Our Lord. This is a curious story, if you think about it. Over the millennia, scholars and theologians have argued over what the baptism of Jesus means. If you step back from the familiar story we no longer question and look at it with fresh eyes, you might be surprised and a little shocked.

Our lesson today comes from the very first lines of Mark’s gospel. While Matthew and Luke begin the story of Jesus with extended preludes covering the background of his conception, his nativity, and, at least in Luke’s gospel, a story or two of his childhood. They are sort of like the wonderful montage sequence at the beginning of the animated movie, *Up*, in that sets the whole stage for the point at which our story begins. You can almost hear the music playing in the background.

Mark, on the other hand, has knowledge of or no interest in this background montage – there is no gentle warm-up for his gospel. You just drop straight into the action. There are merely three short verses in Mark’s gospel that serve as his prelude. In them, we are given the prophetic context for the opening scene, “As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” Then we are immediately launched into the story of John the Baptizer busy at the river Jordan, calling the people of God to repent of their sins and proclaiming that he is merely the one preparing the way for the Messiah: “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the

¹ Christian Century Magazine, September 5, 2012, Vol. 129, No. 18

Holy Spirit.” This message and his call was powerful, for Mark tells us that the people for the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were coming to him to be baptized. Now, that’s evangelism!

What is really surprising, however, is that Jesus appears before John and is baptized as well. Many theologians have spent countless hours arguing over why this would be so. How is it that the Son of God, the anointed Messiah, the Savior of the World, would need receive a baptism of repentance for sin? If he is of God, then he has no sin, so why would he do that? That Jesus was baptized in the Jordan seems indisputable, as all three of the synoptic gospels concur on this point. And yet, Matthew, Mark, and Luke struggled with the theological conflict inherent in the baptism of Jesus and they each tell the story a bit differently. I find it interesting that it is only in Mark’s gospel that it is explicitly stated that it was John who baptized Jesus. Matthew and Luke dance around that a bit, letting suggestion and inference do the work. And Matthew even adds the detail of John objecting to Jesus’ intention to be baptized by him. The fourth evangelist, John, dodges the entire issue by never directly referencing Jesus’ baptism at all, merely allowing the reader to infer it.

The gospel accounts also differ on who, exactly, witnessed the theophany, or revelation of divinity. In Mark’s gospel, it is Jesus who saw the heavens torn apart and hears the voice - “You are my Son.....,” God says. In Matthew, the voice says, “This is my Son...” which implies that others may have heard it as well. In Luke, the Holy Spirit doesn’t descend at all while Jesus was in the river. Rather, it is after the baptisms had taken place, and Jesus had gone off to pray that the spirit descends and voice claims to Jesus alone, “You are my Son...”.

Now, parsing these differences are probably only fascinating to church nerds like me – I understand that. What is important here is that while these evangelists disagree on detail, they concur on the important fact that Jesus was, in fact, baptized. No matter how theologically inconvenient, it did happen and, in this radical act, Jesus was filled with the Spirit and claimed by God as his beloved Son – his true identity is revealed.

This is also a special day in the life of Good Shepherd because today because we not only celebrate the Baptism of Jesus, but also the baptism of the soon-to-be newest member of the Body of Christ, our sister June. Today we bring our beloved to God to be blessed and to enter into the new covenant by membership in the Body of Christ and his Church. Baptism is the sacramental act through which our true and God-given identity is revealed. Through the waters of baptism, we, too, are claimed and made children of God, members of Christ’s body the Church, and heirs of the kingdom of God.

It is said that Martin Luther, when struggling with challenges and doubts, would shout out, “I am baptized!” Luther believed that baptism bestows an identity and affirms our unity with Christ, and that it was important to remember who we are. Baptism is the beginning of a new way of life - to be washed in the waters of baptism is a radical act.

In our baptismal liturgy when the priest is blessing the water, we are called to remember the great waters of creation and destruction in Genesis, the waters of the Red Sea and the Jordan that were crossed when God led his chosen people out of Egypt and into the promised land, and the waters in which the prophet John baptized the repentant to prepare the way for Christ. It is in these baptismal waters that we share in Christ’s death and burial, as well as in his glorious resurrection. And by the Holy Spirit we are sealed and marked as Christ’s own forever.

As participants in the liturgy of Holy Baptism, we all renew our Baptismal Covenant, and we are reminded of who we are and to whom we belong. We are the baptized, the people of the new covenant, and members of Christ’s body. We are the forgiven, broken, and blessed children

of God; the ones to whom God draws near. We are the people who can begin to live into God's kingdom now, and taste a share of the resurrection today – and that is good news, indeed.

So, how might you summarize the gospel in seven words? I invite you to think about that this week. I've pondered this some myself, and here are some of the possibilities that I've come up with: "New life and new relationship with God;" "The waters parted and Christ was resurrected;" and my favorite right now, "Our Baptism reveals God's love." That is only five words... maybe I can rest on the sixth and the seventh!

Amen.