

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
First Sunday after the Epiphany

The Baptism of our Lord

Year B

RCL

Acts 19:1-7

Psalm 29

Mark 1:4-11



The Collect

Father in heaven, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

Acts 19:1-7

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” They replied, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” Then he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They answered, “Into John's baptism.” Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.” On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied — altogether there were about twelve of them.

Psalm 29 Page 620, BCP

Afferte Domino

- 1 Ascribe to the LORD, you gods,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
- 2 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his Name;
worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.
- 3 The voice of the LORD is upon the waters;
the God of glory thunders;
the LORD is upon the mighty waters.
- 4 The voice of the LORD is a powerful voice;
the voice of the LORD is a voice of splendor.
- 5 The voice of the LORD breaks the cedar trees;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon;
- 6 He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
and Mount Hermon like a young wild ox.
- 7 The voice of the LORD splits the flames of fire;
the voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
- 8 The voice of the LORD makes the oak trees writhe
and strips the forests bare.
- 9 And in the temple of the LORD
all are crying, "Glory!"
- 10 The LORD sits enthroned above the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as King for evermore.
- 11 The LORD shall give strength to his people;
the LORD shall give his people the blessing of peace.

Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "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 Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

SERMON

Mark tells us today of the baptism of our Lord by John.

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

This is the beginning of Mark's account and it's unnerving. It's too abrupt. There are no angels, no heavenly choirs, no wise men. There's really nothing that we can romanticize in this account – nothing we could put with the Nativity Set on top of the TV – but there is some potentially deep water in this beginning of Mark's Gospel. Let's see if we can find our way.

The first thing that strikes me is WHAT sins? I thought Jesus was without sin ... John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. What would Jesus have to repent of? This is the problem we

must face when we try to capture God in a net of words. God is eternal. The meanings we attach to words aren't. Words change their meaning over time.

Here's an example I bet you didn't know. To the ancient Greeks living in Athens, an “idiot” was someone characterized by self-centeredness and concerned almost exclusively with private—as opposed to public—affairs. Mature, educated Athenians put the good of their community ahead of their own good. Idiocy was the natural state of ignorance into which all persons were born and its opposite, citizenship, was effected through formalized education. Idiots were born and citizens were made,¹ you might say.

So, as far as the ancient Greeks of Athens were concerned, an idiot was one who put his own good above the good of others. You may make of that what you will,

¹ Wikipedia

politically. I bring it up only to note that that's not what we mean by the word today. The meaning that we ascribe to words isn't absolute. Words, and their meanings, change with time, and you'd have to be a serious idiot to contest that.

Even just in our lifetime, we have watched words morph into other meanings. When we intend to record something, we speak of "taping" it, even though most people haven't recorded to a tape in a great long while. As recently as the Second World War, a "computer" was a woman who did arithmetic with pencil and paper, and a "typewriter" was one who operated a "typing machine". To older people, a "mouse" is a rodent. To younger people, it is a device attached to a computer. To older people, an "album" is a black vinyl disk with recorded music on it. To younger people, the word has no meaning at all, and they'd have to Google it to know

what you're talking about. That's what makes reading the King James version sometimes hazardous. The compilers of that translation spoke the same language as Shakespeare, and we all remember what a treat that was to puzzle out in high school.

Apart from allowing me to observe that a good education is what a country uses to turn a bunch of idiots into good citizens, the changing meaning of words makes it imperative that we make very, very sure that the meaning we are attaching to the words of Scripture is the same meaning that the writer had in mind, keeping in mind that we are reading a translation from an entirely different language. Two of those words we must be careful about are "sin" and "repentance". To 21st Century ears, "sin" is a bad thing that you do, and "repent" is synonymous with "regret" or "remorse". We have to ask if that is the meaning that Mark intends.

Regret and repent are two very different things. Regret is the emotion we feel in response to something we have done wrong. Repentance is a conscious decision to change our way of life so as not to repeat the mistake. Regret is the emotion I felt when they wheeled me into the ER with a heart attack and my cigarettes fell out of my pocket onto the floor. Repentance is the decision I made to stop smoking right after the nurse picked up the cigarettes and said, "I see you USED to be a smoker." Regret is us slapping ourselves in the forehead. Repentance is us courageously setting forth on a new trajectory. Regret permits sorrow over the past to invade our present. Repentance leads our present into a more positive future.

As all of us know, repentance is terrifically difficult to do. To repent is a moral and spiritual revolution to the core of our being. Regret is just being caught in our own

self-centeredness – being an idiot as the ancient Greeks would say. I remember a line by Bart Simpson from the Simpsons about regret. Bart had been caught doing something stupid, self-defeating and indefensible and an explanation was demanded. He replied, “I don't know! I don't know why I did it. I don't know why I liked it, and I don't know why I'm going to do it again!” Regret, even sincere regret, doesn't carry with it any obligation to change our behavior, whereas repentance means a complete re-ordering of our lives.

When we read the account of the baptism of our Lord and read “repentance” as synonymous with “regret” we get all confused and ask, “What had Jesus done that He regretted?” I don't think Mark means that at all. I think Mark is speaking of the new direction Jesus' life is taking. I think he has in mind the full meaning of the Greek word “metanoia” which he used to describe

John's baptism. Metanoia means, "a change of mind, as it appears to one who repents, of a purpose he has formed or of something he has done."

Certainly, "metanoia" **can** mean regret for something one has done, but it has the additional meaning of "a change of mind". I think this is the sense that Mark has in mind – a change of course, a change of life. The baptism which Jesus experienced with John was the point at which his life took a change of direction from what it was, to what it would be.

The other word we must be careful with is "sin". To 21st Century ears, "sin" means bad things you do. Stealing is a sin. Lying is a sin. Murder is a sin. Viewed in that way, it doesn't take much imagination to fancy that just by not lying, stealing or murdering people, we aren't engaged with God's creation in a sinful way. That's a great way to lead yourself astray by pridefully

thinking more of yourself than you ought.

I think we'd do much better if we thought of "sin" as the things we do, the attitudes we hold, the way we interact with God's creation and God's children that separate us from God's purpose. Seen in this way, the baptism of Jesus can be viewed as a symbolic passing from the ordinary earthly life of a rural laborer that Jesus had followed up until that time, to a life filled and directed by God's purpose into which Jesus would now enter. Jesus turned from His original idea of His purpose to embody God's purpose for His life.

That may sound a bit strange to your ears. We're more comfortable with the stories from Matthew and Luke in which Jesus is proclaimed from birth. If you do that, though, your mind will inevitably start to ask what Jesus did from birth to about the age of thirty. That's a very human question to get yourself involved in. An-

cient writers imagined Jesus as a lad doing all manner of fanciful things like striking a playmate dead who displeased him, then raising him from the dead. Those sorts of imaginings don't move the story. They're distractions. We have to walk right by the distractions to get at the meat of what Mark is telling us. Jesus changed his life and the Holy Spirit came upon Him.

The thing that intrigues me about Mark's telling is the parallel between what happened to Jesus, and what happens to each of us when we encounter the Holy Spirit. Jesus was living an ordinary life for the time when he came into contact with John. Perhaps Jesus saw his life laid out before him, the inoffensive life of a country laborer. He would work at the trade he had learned from Joseph. Perhaps he would marry, have children.

He was captured by the words John spoke. They made sense to him. A switch was thrown — a decision

made. Jesus saw that his life up to that point was not the life for which he was destined. Something caused him to reassess all of that, and to change His mind about the direction of His life. He “metanoiaed”, if you will. He turned from that which was to the life for which he was born, just as we are called to do. Something in his interaction with John drew him to the wilderness where John was, drew him into the waters of baptism and, in a flash, he repented of his earlier expectations of His life. He turned from a life of relative comfort to a life of sorrow. In that instant of decision and repentance

... he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

This is the sort of repentance God seeks from us. Smacking yourself in the forehead in remorse and regret does no good for anyone unless you are motivated by

the discomfort you feel to turn from your self-seeking life to an other-directed life, the life of a servant shown us by the example of Jesus. Just as the ancient citizens of Athens believed that everyone is born an idiot but matures to be public-minded citizens, we are born with a childish “Me! Me! Me!” perspective, then we are called by the Holy Spirit to repent of our self-centered lives to take our place as citizens of the Kingdom.

Repenting of a life centered on the wellbeing of self and family just seems awkward in the mouth to say. Changing the trajectory of your life to that of a servant, putting aside private concerns in favor of the good of others seems scary. This is what Jesus did. This is the course that lead Him directly to the cross.

I don't want to stir up pride in this congregation, but I clearly see the working of the Holy Spirit here. When a need is expressed, there is an instant response. This is

so contrary to the self-centered life of a Greek idiot, that I am convinced that it could not occur if the Holy Spirit were not active right here, in Bellefonte, Kentucky. This is not something to boast of. This is something to give humble thanks for. For you, this congregation, this church, this place of spirit-working, I humbly give thanks.

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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