

“GOD IS OUT TO GET YOU”

The Rev. Victor Kim

Mark 1:4-11

(01-10-21) Baptism of Jesus

How would you like to have a cousin like John the baptizer? Clothed in camel's hair and subsisting on a diet of locusts and wild honey, this man is the original survivor, the ancient Jewish version of Bear Grills. Every family seems to have one, the one who looks just a bit out of place, who talks in ways that don't always observe the unwritten rules of polite company, whose choice of vocation or lack of a consistent one betrays an iconoclastic approach to life. But its not what he looks like that's the most controversial part about John, it's what he says. Mark's gospel account gives us just the bare minimum about what John was saying. He was proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. But other gospel accounts are a bit more expansive, letting us know that John was quite willing to confront the hypocrisy of the leaders of the people, calling them, among other things, a brood of vipers.

There's very little in the biblical witness that tells us anything about the relationship between Jesus and John until we get to the time of Jesus' baptism. We might assume that they knew one another, after all their mothers had shared a special bond when both found themselves unexpectedly pregnant. Again in Mark's bare bones account, Jesus one day shows up to the Jordan where John is baptizing people and just like the others that day, he's baptized by John in the river. There's no account of the conversation that the other gospels record, where John recognizes Jesus for who he is, saying I need to be baptized by you. Here in Mark's account, Jesus just shows up for baptism, just like anyone else. That Jesus would show up to be baptized has long been something of a mystery for many people. Why would Jesus want to be baptized? Baptism is a sacrament that symbolizes our sharing in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Living Faith, a subordinate standard of our denomination says that the water of baptism signifies the washing away of sin, the start of new life in Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. As sinners, we understand what that means for us, but why would Jesus, who is God in human form, sinless, seek to be baptized? He's the son of God, God incarnate, and we know that God is holy, that God doesn't sin, God doesn't need to repent for the forgiveness of sin. So, what's Jesus doing in the line up at the Jordan, waiting to be dunked in the river by John? Maybe a more modern image might be that of an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting where Jesus shows up. He stands up and everyone goes quiet and you realize that he's going to say, Hello, I'm Jesus, and I'm an alcoholic. You'd want to stop him, at least you'd want to say, no Jesus, you're not.¹

So why does he do it? Why does he get baptized? Aren't we far more comfortable with a Jesus who takes on our sin, even to death on the cross, than a Jesus who presents himself for

¹ Brian Volck, *Assumed and Healed*, Ekklesia Project

baptism for the repentance of sin? Gregory of Nazianzus, a 4th century Bishop of Constantinople wrote about the incarnation, **“What has not been assumed, has not been healed.”** What he meant was that if Jesus didn’t assume all our humanity, then Jesus did not heal us in all our human frailty, brokenness and sin. So even if Jesus didn’t sin, is it not the case that he was still fully human, fully experienced in the complete range of human emotions and needs, from anger to hunger, from temptation to shame to dread? After all, God was not playing at being Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus wasn’t, as the early church heretics would claim, only seemingly human, when in reality he was all spirit. Docetists and Gnostics and Marcionites all claimed that somehow the human Jesus was either not really present or was separate from the spirit Jesus, the divine Jesus. But if Gregory is correct, that what has not been assumed has not been healed, then to deny Jesus, the fully incarnate, the fully human, God, of all that makes us human, all our weakness and foibles and worries, is to also reject the full extent of Christ’s healing power. Jesus stands before John at baptism to expose and assume all our hidden darkness and to heal it – not only our sin but every single gem of guilt – whether betrayal, excess, deception, or violence – everything that we carry in the pockets of our memory and retrieve at times to start another round of self-flagellation. **He frees us from the hopeless project of trying to claim a better past.**²

So Jesus, fully human, but fully divine, without sin but not shielded from every human weakness or worry, wades into the Jordan where his cousin John baptizes him, and that’s when all heaven breaks loose. As he was coming up out of the water, says the gospel, Jesus 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.” Jesus, the Messiah, who had long been promised, who in the season of Advent we made careful preparation to welcome, who at Christmas we joyfully received as the gift of God, who in the visit of the Magi was revealed in Epiphany to be God’s gift to the Gentiles as well as the Jews, this Jesus is now revealed to be the one who assumes and heals all human weakness, worry and sin. **Jesus is God’s gift of presence and love, healing and grace, for all the world.**

When Jesus emerged from the water, the heavens were ‘torn apart.’ There’s one other time in Jesus’ life when those words are used again. When Jesus dies on the cross, at the moment of his death the curtain in the temple that separates the Holy of Holies, that most sacred space in the Jewish faith where God was symbolically understood to reside, that curtain was torn apart. **So what does it mean that as Jesus emerged onto the scene that the heavens get torn open and that as Jesus exits the scene the curtain in the temple gets torn open?** According to the preacher Tom Long there was an occasion a few years ago when a biblical scholar was explaining our text from Mark 1 to a group of teenagers. This scholar told the teens that when Jesus was baptized, the skies did not just open up, as some older translations said, but in the original Greek of Mark 1:10 we are told the skies ripped open, split in an almost violent way.

² ibid

This was very dramatic and forceful. “Get the point?” the scholar asked the group. “When Jesus was baptized the heavens that separate us from God were ripped open so that now we can get to God. Because of Jesus we have access to God--we can get close to him.”

But there was one young man sitting in the front row, arms crossed, making a fairly obvious display of his disinterest. But suddenly he perked up and said, “That ain’t what it means.” “What?” the Bible scholar said, startled. “I said that ain’t what that means,” the teenager repeated. “It means that the heavens were ripped open so that now God can get at us anytime God wants. Now nobody’s safe!” That teenager may have understood something that we don’t always remember. Jesus assumed our sin, our weakness, our vulnerability, our guilt, and healed us of it all, and the heavens were torn open, the temple curtain was torn open from the top down, not so that we could get to God, but so that God could get to us. **You see, God is out to get you. But not because God wants to punish you, or make you pay for what you did wrong or didn’t do right. God is not out to get you because God is a vindictive, angry, judgmental God, but because God who chose to come to us at Christmas as Emmanuel, in the form of a helpless baby, is a God who truly, fully, completely, loves you.**

What is your relationship with Jesus built around? Who is he for you? Is Jesus a friend, a coach, a taskmaster, a judge? Does the idea of God made incarnate in Jesus scare you into obedience? Does belief in Jesus leave you in a place where your life and choices feel restricted, limited, that somehow you are missing out because you have chosen to follow Jesus? Could it be that if that’s the case for us, we are missing the point? If God wanted to scare us into obedience, if God wanted our relationship with God to be rooted in fear or anxiety, if God wanted to constantly judge us and find us wanting, God could do that anytime, God could have revealed what we needed to know about God in ways that were far more concrete and clear and far less ambiguous, God could have come to us as a conqueror, but God chose to speak through the promise of a child, God chose to be Emmanuel through a vulnerable birth to an unremarkable couple in the backwaters of the Roman empire, an eternity away from the pomp and pageantry of power.

In the baptism of Jesus, God declares that whatever it is that would make us afraid of God, whatever it is that would root our relationship with God around ideas of guilt, fear, obligation or anxiety about judgment, these things have all been assumed by Jesus and in him we have been healed of that which separates us from God, from the fullness of God’s desire to love us. It is into the name of Jesus, the death and resurrection of Jesus, that we are baptized. In the waters of our own baptism, God speaks our name, unites us to Christ, and grants us the promise of new life through the Spirit. God says to us, “with you I am well pleased.” This free, undeserved gift from God has the power to transform our hearts and minds, transform our lives. I wonder, for those of us who have never understood our relationship with God as being rooted in God’s unconditional love for us, but in some kind of obligation, some kind of deal

with God, that if I do this, then God will love me, **I wonder whether this year will be the year that we finally give up that desire to somehow control who God is for us, to bargain around our deservingness or lack of it, and to just receive with humility and joy, the love of God for us?** God is out to get you, to get you to know how much God loves you, loves us. To know that one is deeply loved is the greatest of human experiences. That truth is a simple one that Jesus experiences at the pivotal moment he begins his public ministry. **And the truth is that you and I and every single person on this planet is also the beloved of God.**

That's not always easy to believe and believe me, some weeks make it harder to believe than others! You know what I'm talking about. Watching the violent mob storm the US Capital building, incited and encouraged by their President, on the very day that his duly elected successor was being certified by congress, it was so painful to watch the anger, the hatred, the violence, and even the conflating of support for Trump with support for Jesus, and yet we are to believe that even those in this mob, and the man who riled them up and egged them on, are still loved by God! And of course, it's true, Jesus doesn't assume everything he does about our sinfulness, only to leave out the truly horrible among us, only to reject the complete narcissists and egomaniacs. No, Jesus assumes everything so that all of us are who broken in some way can be redeemed. In the midst of all this anger and blame, this chaos and conflict, this collective brokenness of our human existence, **we need to hear the gospel more clearly than ever before. God is out to get us, even the ones we wish God would just leave alone. Not everyone will respond to God's grace, but it's there, there for everyone.** And as the Apostle Paul says in his letter to the Romans, there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. **It's never too late to accept that love, that truth.**

St. Augustine, the early church father and bishop, came to this life changing understanding at the age of thirty-two. He wrote: ***Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you! You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you. In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things which you created. You were with me, but I was not with you. Created things kept me from you; yet if they had not been in you they would have not been at all. You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and I burned for your peace.***³

God is out to get you, to get us. In Christ, God has collapsed the distance between God and us and in our baptisms, God declares that we are God's beloved. **God is out to get us, to get us to know this truth.**

Thanks be to God.

³ Peter Woods, The Listening Hermit, The Original Love Language – The Baptism of Jesus