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St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church – Florissant, MO
Epiphany 1/Baptism of our Lord – January 10,2021
Mark 1:4-11

It is a new year and in our Gospel today we see Jesus doing a new thing, encountering a new beginning. After the events at our nation's capitol this week, we could use a word of hope this morning, a word of something new that God is doing among us. Clearly clinging to an identity forged in one political group or another, one ideology or another, one leader or another is not working for us. Our Gospel writer today offers us another look at identity, one that is deeper and clearer and purer than any identity that we can claim based on human groupings.

Mark jumps right into the story. There is no genealogy, no birth story, no wise men, just Jesus. This moment is a new moment of declaring God's reign, but it's not an entirely new story. The opening lines of Mark's Gospel that come just before the words we heard this morning quote the Hebrew Scriptures that Jesus himself would have known intimately. Mark narrates the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection not as a new story about God and God's people, but as a pivotal moment in the larger story of God's revelation in human history. God has been working throughout history with Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Meriam, Isaiah, Jeremiah, John the Baptizer to prepare the way for this moment. God whom we meet in Jesus this morning is the same God of the Hebrew Scriptures who is doing a new thing.

And that new thing begins with baptism. But it's curious because John proclaims a baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sins. If Jesus is the one without sin, why did he need to be baptized? Mark makes it clear that the baptism is a moment of announcing Jesus' identity as the Messiah. The heavens are torn open – Mark is telling us that this moment, this unveiling of

the identity of Jesus is a revelation of God. Then the Spirit descends – it is the Spirit that anoints the Messiah. Jesus is the anointed one.

And if there is still any uncertainty left, we hear next of a voice from heaven, clearly the voice of God, telling Jesus, “You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.” In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is the only one who hears this voice. The reader knows the true identity of Jesus – Mark wants us to know from the start who Jesus is. But the characters in Mark’s gospel only come to understand the identity of Jesus gradually. Over and over and over again they don’t get it. They can only understand who Jesus is when they are willing to accept his true identity as the suffering servant – the one who will live and die and rise again for all humanity.

This is our call in Baptism – to spend our lives uncovering our identity in Christ. The identity that is given to us in baptism, just as it was given to Jesus in his baptism. We can hear God say to us, “You are my beloved.” This is what the Christian community affirmed on the day you were baptized, whether you remember that moment or not. Your identity as God’s beloved, my identity as God’s beloved, was established and proclaimed in our baptism.

This belovedness is not the end in itself. It is the opening to allow God to enter deeply within and to transform us, to do a new thing in us. The Dutch priest Henri Nouwen writes in his book *Life of the Beloved* that “from the moment we claim the truth of being the beloved, we are faced with the call to become who we are. Becoming the beloved is the great spiritual journey we have to make.” The journey he describes is the baptismal journey with Christ into a life of love and compassion poured out for others.

Nouwen writes about how hard it is to claim our belovedness as our core truth. “I kept running around it in large or small circles,” he writes, “always looking for someone or something

able to convince me of my belovedness. It was as if I kept refusing to hear the voice that speaks from the very depth of my being and says, ‘You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests.’” That voice has always been there, but it seems that I was much more eager to listen to other, louder voices saying: ‘Prove that you are worth something; do something relevant, spectacular, or powerful, and then you will earn the love you so desire.’” Does this sound familiar in your life? I know it does in mine.

This is the very thing that Jesus encountered right after his baptism. Mark tells us that Jesus was immediately driven out to the wilderness where he was tempted to prove his belovedness by doing spectacular things. Matthew and Luke fill in the details. They tell us that Jesus was tempted to make stones into bread to care for himself, to jump off a cliff to prove that God’s angels would keep him from harm. Jesus was tempted to secure the glory of political leadership – to rule the kingdoms of the world. But Jesus knows he is God’s beloved. He doesn’t have to do spectacular things to prove himself. He only has to rest in God’s love and let that lead him forward to manifest God’s love in the world.

That is our baptismal promise, too. We are God’s beloved. This is our true identity in Christ. And we can only acknowledge that gift in others if we claim it for ourselves. This is the new thing that God is waiting to do for us at every turn – to shower on us a deep abiding love that defines who we are and who we are becoming. Our identity as God’s beloved in Christ means we don’t have to cling to other identities that separate us from one another. We don’t have to be right, so right that we are willing to trample on one another. We don’t have to be afraid of people who look or think differently than we do when we know we are God’s beloved. There is nothing to fear. We don’t have to believe that if someone else wins all is lost, that if someone

else's needs are met, there won't be enough for all of us. As God's beloved, we are free to choose love and compassion because we know who we are and that can never be taken away.

I wonder what would happen if we were to intentionally embrace our baptismal identity as God's beloved in this tumultuous New Year. Maybe if those words spoken at Jesus' baptism and at our own baptisms can take hold, we will find the self-love to love God and our neighbor as we promise in our baptism. Maybe then God's justice will cover the earth instead of some twisted version of justice that our world keeps acting out. Maybe then we will see the Epiphany.