Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

January 3, 2021

*“Beautiful Beloved”*

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTNAS

I keep thinking that the person who wrote the Gospel of Mark must have been rather impatient to get this gospel written.   He seems to have wanted to get it all down on paper or parchment before he forgot anything important.  Think of it: he does not dwell on any particulars about Jesus before he comes down to the Jordan to be baptized by John.  We do not get any kind of background on him—no genealogy, no mention of earthly parents, no mention of Mary, or the virgin birth, no trek to Bethlehem, no Christmas star, not a single angel or shepherd anywhere to be found.

If the Gospel of Mark was the only gospel preserved or allowed into the canon, then all we would know about Jesus’ life before his ministry began is that he was baptized in the Jordan, and then spent forty days in the wilderness being tempted by the devil.

I suppose we could add a little detail on our own. We could make the observation that one day, for some reason (also) *not* recorded, Jesus left his home in Nazareth and traveled to a part of the Jordan called, Qasr el Yahud—a trip of some 76 miles—which was a considerable distance. Tradition tells us this is where John was baptizing.

There, Jesus joined the crowds who had come out to repent of their sins and be baptized by John. We do not know what prompted him to go and find John. We do not know why He felt the need to be baptized. All we know is that he went. Mark introduces us to an adult Jesus (in verse nine), as he takes his turn among the throngs who have come out to the River Jordan.

Interestingly enough: Mark does not describe what Jesus looked like. Yet, he does record for us a brief description of John and how he was “clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist.”  We are also told of his diet of “locusts and wild honey.”

These are odd details for us to hear today.  However, it would have made perfect sense to the first people who heard Mark’s description of John.  They would have known that this meant that John as an ascetic.  A holy man who was probably connected to a movement of people who preached and ministered in the Judean countryside, outside and away from the corrupting influence of the city, and the Roman occupiers.

So, to recap: Mark relates this part of Jesus’ story without any biographical background. When Jesus appears at the Jordan, John does not experience a moment of recognition. Jesus and John do not even exchange any words. Jesus simply seems to wade out to meet John in the water, and John baptizes him.

The important moment for Mark—the moment he wants us to hear and remember—is the moment after Jesus has been submerged beneath the water. As he rises, he sees the heavens open above him.  Indeed, Mark dramatically describes the heavens as being “torn” apart, “torn” open. And so, as the clouds are torn apart, a dove descends down toward Jesus, and a powerful voice claims him as “son,” and pronounces him “pleasing.”

Like I said before: despite the brevity, Mark’s recording is dramatic—vivid, even quite theatrical.

What impressed me as I read through this is this: if the Gospel of Mark had been the only gospel in the Bible, this is about all we would have known about Jesus.  And this made me wonder: if this is all we knew, would this have been enough for you and me to have come to faith?

I hope so, because apparently, it was enough for Jesus.

What I mean is this: Jesus heard and saw something profound and beautiful in that moment—and through Mark—even if it had only been Mark—we are able to see it, too.

What Jesus saw and heard was the voice of God proclaiming him “beloved”—even more than that. God drew him even closer proclaiming Jesus God’s own son.

We are so used to hearing this that I wonder if we really hear it in a way that touches the very core of our being—the way I believe it touched Jesus.

I do not usually tell long stories from other pastors in my sermons, but recently, I read a story told by another pastor, Jan Richardson, who told a story about another pastor that made me hear Jesus’ story differently—more profoundly beautiful than I ever have before.

So, I am going to tell you that story now.

The story is about a woman named **Fayette and her** pastor, Janet Wolf, and their church Hobson United Methodist Church in Nashville, Tennessee. Now this happened quite a while ago, about 15 years ago.

Pastor Janet described the wildly diverse congregation in this way: [we] include 1*“…people with power and PhDs and folks who have never gone past the third grade; folks with two houses and folks living on the streets; and, as one person who struggles with mental health declared, ‘those of us who are crazy and those who think they’re not.’”*

*Years ago, a woman named Fayette found her way to Hobson. Fayette lived with mental illness and lupus and without a home. As she came into the church, she joined the new member class. The conversation about baptism—“this holy moment when we are named by God’s grace with such a power it won’t come undone,” as Pastor Janet puts it—especially grabbed Fayette’s imagination.*

*Janet tells of how, during the class, Fayette would ask again and again, “And when I’m baptized, I am…?”*

*“The class,” Janet writes, “learned to respond, ‘Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.’ ‘Oh, yes!’ she’d say, and then we could go back to our discussion.”*

*The day of Fayette’s baptism came. This is how Janet describes it: Fayette went under, came up spluttering, and cried, ‘And now I am…?’ And we all sang, ‘Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.’ ‘Oh, yes!’ she shouted as she danced all around the fellowship hall.*

*Two months later, Pastor Janet received a phone call.*

*Fayette had been beaten and raped and was at the county hospital. So [Pastor Janet] went.*

*She could see her from a distance, pacing back and forth. When she got to the door, she heard, [Fayette saying] ‘I am beloved….’ She turned, saw [Pastor Janet], and said, ‘I am beloved, precious child of God, and….’ Catching sight of herself in the mirror—hair sticking up, blood and tears streaking her face, dress torn, dirty, and rebuttoned askew, she started again, ‘I am beloved, precious child of God, and…’ She looked in the mirror again and declared, ‘…and God is still working on me. If you come back tomorrow, I’ll be so beautiful I’ll take your breath away!’*

***Beloved,*** *the voice from heaven had proclaimed as the baptismal waters of the Jordan rolled off Jesus’ body.*

***Beloved,*** *the voice named him as he prepared to begin his public ministry.*

***Beloved,*** *spoken with such power that it would permeate Jesus’ entire life and teaching.*

***Beloved,*** *he would name those he met who were desperate for healing, for inclusion, for hope.*

***Beloved,*** *echoing through the ages, continuing to name those drenched in the waters of baptism.*

***Beloved.***

***Child of God.***

*Fayette—beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.*

*Like her, with her—we have been named by God’s grace with such power it won’t ever come undone.*

As Pastor Janet also wrote: *As I remember the Baptism of Jesus, how will I reckon with the fact that I, that we, have shared in those waters—that in the sacrament of baptism and as members of the body of Christ, we, too, are named as beloved children of God? How will we live in such a way that others will know themselves as named by God, beloved by God—especially those who have been given cause to think they are less than loved, less than children of the One who created them?*

Getting back to my own original thought—if we had only the Gospel of Mark to tell us about Jesus—I am confident it would have been enough for me and for you, because, as we know: it was enough for Jesus.

Moreover, Mark has told us everything we need to know about Jesus. We know that Jesus trusted God. We know that he came out to the Jordan, waded into the same waters, and was gathered into God’s deep and power-filled love as God’s own beloved son.

We know that after that moment, the world was never again the same. Filled with God’s love, Jesus fulfilled his mission. He was and is our Savior, Jesus Christ—beloved Son of God.

As we begin a new year, may this be one in which we will all come to richer, deeper understanding of the love that has been poured into us through Christ. And knowing this about God’s love for us, may we give thanks, and then turn and bless the world with the same grace, hope, and kindness. May this be so. Amen.