

Lucia Lloyd's sermon  
Epiphany 1  
Mark 1:4-11

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Today's program is sponsored by Phil Moore and Gary Chafin in honor of Rick Skelton for his kindness and consideration of others and dedication to St. Stephen's church family.

I am glad you are here in church on this cold and snowy morning. This is not just because I like you, although I do, or just because it is always a wonderful thing to worship God, although it is. I am glad you are here in church this morning because today in church we are celebrating a holiday that is, in some ways, even bigger than Christmas! Most of you didn't know until after you had arrived that today is a holiday. If you had guessed that we are celebrating the Feast of the Epiphany you would have been close. The Feast of the Epiphany was yesterday, which means that the 12 days of Christmas are over and it's a good time to take down your tree. So today is the first Sunday after the Epiphany, and every year on the first Sunday after the Epiphany, we celebrate the holiday of The Baptism of Our Lord.

Why do I say that it is, in some ways, even bigger than Christmas? It's because scripture presents it that way. You may remember that the birth of Jesus is not mentioned anywhere in the letters of Paul, and it is mentioned in only two of the four gospels: the Gospel of Matthew, which focuses on Joseph, and the Gospel of Luke, which focuses on Mary. The Gospel of John talks about the Word made flesh, and light coming into the world, but does not have a birth narrative. There is no birth narrative in the Gospel of Mark, the earliest of the gospels. In Mark's gospel, Jesus simply arrives on the scene as an adult in the verse we just heard: "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the river Jordan".

By contrast, Jesus' baptism is discussed in six books of the Bible. It is described in all four of the gospels, as well as being mentioned in Acts, and in Paul's letter to the Romans. So scripture treats Jesus' baptism as bigger than his birth.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus' baptism also has resonances that go well beyond this particular passage. Mark presents it as part of a triad of events: Jesus' baptism at the beginning, the Transfiguration in the middle, and the crucifixion near the end. These three events have recurring themes: voices from heaven, things tearing apart, belovedness, and especially Jesus as God's son.

At Jesus' baptism here, we read, "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."

At the Transfiguration we read, "from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him."

At the crucifixion we read, "and the curtain of the temple was torn in two...Now when the centurion saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly, this man was God's Son."

Our lectionary places the baptism on the first Sunday of the season after the Epiphany, and the transfiguration on the last Sunday of the season after the Epiphany, because both of them are epiphanies, things that show who God is, that reveal God, that shine light on God, that are manifestations of God, that are realizations of who God is. In addition, both of them are epiphanies because they show who Jesus is. What they show is that Jesus is close kin with God, that Jesus is God's son. In them God also tells Jesus that he is Beloved.

What follows these epiphanies is not a coincidence. Right after Jesus' baptism, Mark tells us, "And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan." After the Transfiguration, Jesus tells his disciples, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him". The revelation that Jesus is God's son, and that he is Beloved, does not mean he will have an easy life. On the contrary, it means he will face temptations from Satan, and then betrayal, suffering, and death. And the fact that he is about to face temptations, betrayal, suffering, and death makes it even more important that he knows who he is, the Son of God, and that he is God's Beloved. He is able to take that awareness with him as he faces that temptation and that pain.

It is significant that God tells Jesus, "with you I am well pleased" here at the beginning, before his ministry has begun, before he has resisted temptation. We can see that it is not that God is pleased with Jesus because of what he has done, because of what he has resisted, because of what he has endured, or because of what his ministry has accomplished. He hasn't done anything yet. God is well pleased with him before he has done anything to earn God's approval, simply because of who he is and because it is the nature of God to love.

This passage is theologically rich, because there is so much significance in what it says about the relationship between God and Jesus. What do the scriptures most want us to know about the relationship between these two persons of the Trinity? "You are my Son, the Beloved,

with you I am well pleased.” The nature of the Trinity is belovedness. The nature of the Trinity is a relationship of being well pleased with the other, taking pleasure in the other.

I am not a messiah, and God’s relationship to me is not exactly the same as God’s relationship to Jesus. Still, what we see about the nature of God and the nature of God’s relationship with Jesus opens our hearts to something else: that we are all children of God, and we are all beloved. Even with the fact that God knows we fall into sin, God is pleased with us and has been from before the time we started doing good deeds or accomplishing anything, simply because of who we are and because it is the nature of God to love. This does not mean that our lives will be free from temptation or pain or death; it does mean that when we face those difficulties we can take with us a deep awareness of how much we are beloved children of God. It also means that our neighbors, including the ones with whom we are not well pleased, are also beloved children of God.

Each of us can treat our belovedness glibly or hold it at a distance if we want to. Or we can take the opportunities to move into a deep awareness that through all the ups and downs of our lives, our belovedness is our essential identity; we can immerse ourselves in our belovedness; we can entrust ourselves to our belovedness; we can even celebrate our belovedness.