Sunday, 1/10/21

**Mark 1:4-11**

4John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5And 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. 6Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7He 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. 8I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

9In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10And 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. 11And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

**Sermon**

Baptisms are always a highlight for any pastor, and for pastors. During the two years I spent as a lay preacher at my first church before I got ordained, one of the things I most looked forward to about being ordained was being able to baptize children. Sure enough at least two children needed baptizing by the time I left. Most pastors would love to have an altar call with people lined up down the aisles, but at a small church a couple of people during a three-year period is what you get sometimes, and it’s worth it to see a family and a church commit to raising a child in the faith together, especially given how little work is involved in baptism as we perform them. For John it was another matter: he was out in the wilderness baptizing people in the Jordan River. Not to mention that John hardly sounds like the cleaned-up, TV-ready televangelist type. People like their baptisms to be feel-good affairs featuring cute babies reacting to the pastor splashing some water on them, but John’s baptism is explicitly about repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Despite this, people are seeking John out in the wilderness to confess their sins and be baptized. They seem to sense they need this. It turns out that one of the people who seeks John the Baptist Jordan River to be baptized is Jesus.

If you think about it, it might seem strange that Jesus feels compelled to get baptized. If John proclaims a baptism for the forgiveness of sins, why would Jesus, who didn’t sin, need to be baptized? Mark doesn’t tell us if John recognized Jesus as the one he’d been preaching about, or if John went ahead with the baptism. (John may have streamlined the whole process to get through a long line of people, Disney World-style; then again I imagine he took baptism seriously enough to have spend time talking to the people he baptized.) It’s an interesting question of Jesus’s divinity and humanity: did he already know that he was the Son of God, and what his mission was, or was this part of his identity only revealed to him when he was baptized? The baptism seems to earn God’s approval: when Jesus comes up out of the water, the heavens are ripped open, the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus, and he hears a voice declaring him God’s Beloved Son, with whom God is well pleased. Apparently, even for sinless Jesus, the baptism has an effect.

It may seem strange that people are seeking John out to be baptized at all. He’s out in the wilderness wearing camel’s hair and talking about sin and repentance and baptizing people in a river. That seems like a hard sell, but people are coming to him. Maybe they already feel like something is wrong in the world and in themselves, and they want to be cleansed of it. John exemplifies the kind of humility implied in repenting and asking for forgiveness. His words about Jesus suggest that John’s ministry is focused on pointing towards God rather than lifting himself up: “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. 8I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” John’s baptism isn’t a performance. It’s a sign that he’s looking for a savior to show up to address this world’s brokenness.

That Savior shows up and submits to baptism himself. Jesus shows the same humility that John does: by getting baptized. He shows that he’s fully committed to entering into this world’s brokenness and healing it. Mark says that as Jesus comes out of the water, the heavens are torn apart and the Spirit descends on him. This isn’t a door opening to let the Spirit through only to shut again: the barrier between God and human, put up by God’s distance from us and our sin, is torn apart, and God’s presence is available to us permanently.

That sense that the world isn’t right and we need to repent is stronger than ever now. Some of us thought that, with the election over and a new year beginning maybe things would suddenly be better. Then a few days ago an armed militia stormed the Capitol Building. Clearly we have a lot of work to do when two sides of a political debate threaten to kill each other.

* How this passage speaks to our current situation
  + Call for humility
  + Repent: search yourself, confess sin
  + Look honestly at national sin (our side and the other side)
* Hope
  + God is here in this world
  + God wants to heal the world
  + If there’s a better world, we should do what we can to live into it and help this world conform to it