

“Look at Jesus”
Mark 1:4-11
January 10, 2021; Baptism of the Lord

And so it happened that one day a brilliant architect had a huge legal falling-out with his long-time mentor and guide. This younger guy couldn't handle even constructive criticism, and so he ended up rejecting the person who helped him along so much. When it was all over, his spouse summed up the real problem. “It really began with an ungenerous father,” she explained, “and a talented son who never received the affirmation and love he craves.”

Sound familiar? It happens all the time, in families, in businesses, all over. Many children grow up in our world who have never had a father say to them — either in words, looks, or in hugs — “You are my dear child! You are the one I love! You make me very glad.” In our world, even those fathers who feel this in their hearts are often too tongue-tied or embarrassed to tell their children how delighted they are with them. Many, tragically, go the complete opposite route: angry voices, bitter rejection, slamming doors.

Because of this familiar human observation, we all need to be reminded that the entire Christian gospel can be summed up a single point. Listen carefully: when the living God looks at us, at every baptized believer in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior — God says to us what God said to Jesus on that day. God sees us, not as we are in ourselves, but as we are in Jesus Christ. It oftentimes seems impossible, especially to people who have never had this kind of support from earthly parents, but it's true. God looks at us and says, "You are my dear, dear child. I'm delighted with you." Listen to that slowly, with your name at the start, and reflect quietly on God saying that to you, both at your baptism and every day since. God says that to you today.

How does this come about? It will take the whole biblical story, Genesis to Revelation — particularly the stories of Jesus's death and resurrection — to explain. We can't cram it all in today, but this is what the Christian gospel is all about.

It's true for one simple and yet profound reason. Jesus of Nazareth in the Messiah, and the Messiah represents his people. What's true of Jesus the Messiah, is true of every individual — of you, of me. The

word “Messiah” means “the Anointed One.” And this story tells how Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit, marked out as God’s Son. The Messiah is called “God’s son” in a number of biblical passages, including Psalm 2:7. The king proclaims the Lord’s decree: “The LORD said to me, ‘You are my son. Today I have become your Father.’”

Though the early Christians realized quite quickly that Jesus is God’s Son in an even deeper sense. And because of this they clung on to his messiahship for dear life. This particular Messiah would save his people. This Messiah will set us free. It was because Jesus was and is Messiah that God said to those early Christians, as God does even today, what was said to Jesus at his baptism. And without that blessed word from God, all we often hear, in our mind’s ear, are doors being slammed.

Father, I pray that this is the church of the open door!

Mark’s gospel tells the story in straight-forward language, much like the Old Testament: “...Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and was baptized by John in the river Jordan. That very moment, as he was getting out of the water, he saw the heavens open, and the spirit coming down like a dove onto him.” When we go back to the biblical roots we

will realize what “saw the heavens open” means. It doesn’t mean that Jesus saw a little door ajar up in the sky. In the Bible “heaven” often means God’s supernatural dimension behind the visible reality that *we* in our limited imaginations consider to be ordinary. What is going on here is more than the likening of an invisible curtain, because right in front of us the “ordinary” things as we see them are suddenly turned back. Instead of trees and cornfields and houses — or in Jesus’s case, the stark wilderness and the crowds — we are standing in the presence of a different reality altogether. Heaven is the *true* reality.

A good deal of Christian faith is a matter of learning to live by this different and absolutely truer reality even when we can’t see it.

Sometimes, at decisive and climatic moments, the curtain is drawn back and we see, or hear, what’s *really* going on. We may have to slow down to see such holy moments. Most of the time we walk by faith, not by sight.

One of the things Mark the evangelist is saying to us, in the way he’s written his gospel, is that when we look at the whole life of Jesus — *everything*, his birth, his ministry of loving the people considered by the

uptight religious authorities as the scum of the earth, his suffering, his dying, his rising again — *everything* about Jesus is how we are to understand the one, true God. Look at this story, Mark says, look at this life of Jesus, and learn to see and hear in it the heavenly vision, the heavenly voice. Learn to hear these words as addressed to yourself. Let them change you. Let them mold you. Let them make you into somebody new, the person God wants you to be. Discover in this story the normally hidden, heavenly dimension of God's world. Open your eyes to see, your ears to hear.

Any early Christian who read this scripture passage would have also, of course, believed that in his or her own baptism into Jesus the Messiah — this was the moment when, for them, the curtain has been drawn back and these words had been spoken directly to them. In today's church, we need to earnestly pray to find intentional ways, of bringing this truth to life by emphasizing it and teaching about God's true character and virtue. The gospel is not bad news. The gospel is good news about God loving the world.

When we emphasize God's love, we will be more equipped, as Jesus was, for those times when we are out in a dry and barren land. What is this COVID-19 we are going through, but a dry and barren land? And so we look to Jesus as he acts out the great drama of Israel's exodus from Egypt, Israel's journey through the wilderness into the promised land. The road Jesus must tread, precisely because he is God's dear Son, is the road that lead through dry and dusty paths, through hardship, temptation, and apparent failure. This is the hard way of the cross.

And so it is for us as well. If we imagine that our God is a cosmic bully or an angry, threatening parent ready to yell at us, slam the door on us, or kick us in the face because we haven't quite made the the grade — we will fail at any hint of temptation. Bad theology about God's true character and virtue can kill. Many hurting people can't stomach God because of the petty lies told about God and all the meanness perpetrated in God's name. The world is noisy and full of lies. If we remember the true voice that speaks those powerful words of love, we will find the way through no matter what.

Mark tells us that after Jesus's baptism, "All at once the spirit pushed him into the desert...and the satan tested him there. He was with the wild beasts, and angels waited on him." We're not told whether these wild beasts were threatening or not, though it's implied that they were. But regardless, we are told quite clearly that angels were there as well. The angels were not keeping Jesus from being tested by satan, just as finally they wouldn't keep Jesus from Calvary's cross. So why were the angels in the wilderness? The angels were there to assure and reassure Jesus that his beloved Father was watching over him. His beloved Father was watching over him, was there with him, was loving him. God was acting through him, pouring out the Holy Spirit all the time in and through his dear, dear Son.

So what can we learn from this? This is what we can learn: Jesus went the way that all his people must go. Jesus could do it because he had heard the words of love, the words of life. The application for you and for me? As with Jesus, so it is with us. Take no further step this day until you have carefully listened the words of your heavenly Father:

“You are my dear child! You are the one I love! You make me very glad.”

May God’s words of love and life be heard by you and me. Look at Jesus — and God will get you through.

Amen.

