

Forget Christmas. The baby, manger, Mary and Joseph. Shepherds. Angels. Pretend none of that exists. And then you have Mark's gospel. In Mark's gospel we have no miraculous birth stories, no baby wrapped in swaddling clothes. *Mark's story begins here, in the water, by the riverside of the Jordan.*

Mark's story begins with ancient words and a strange character. The opening words to Mark's gospel are from the prophet Isaiah foretelling the one who will cry out in the wilderness and prepare the way of the Lord. And then here he is: "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

Mark is the shortest of the four gospels. His favorite word is "immediately." His stories are quick, to the point, without extra details that we may find in Matthew or Luke. So why then does Mark spend time talking about John's fashion sensibilities and interesting diet? "Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey."

What this description tells us, besides that John will *not* win the next project runway series, but *may* be on Oprah to talk about a new wild foods diet, is that he is, well, part of the wilderness, the edge. He is far from the center of... anything - the empire, the city, politics, religious leadership, normal behavior. He makes his own clothes and lives off the land out here in the wilderness, and he is far from legitimized by the normal folks who legitimize such religious gatherings or potential preachers. And he is not in their pocket and his not acting on their authority. Which also explains why he quickly ends up arrested and later killed by these same authorities.

But why does this wilderness scene matter? It matters because it signals something new. Something radical. Something edgy – literally. This new kingdom does not arise from within existing powers, but quite independently of them, at the margins. And it is something compelling enough that people are intentionally going *out*, heading to the wilderness, to the edges, into these waters.

God's people know about wilderness – the place of journey, of encountering God, of frustration, of wandering, of learning and growing. But one would expect something really important religiously to be happening in Jerusalem, in the hub, with lots of publicity and spectacle. But Mark anchors his story here, in these wilderness waters.

Fulfilling Isaiah's words, John is sent to baptize and to prepare the way for Jesus. To point to the one who is more powerful, more worthy, and who comes with the power of the Holy Spirit.

And then we meet him. This one John is pointing to. This is our first introduction to Jesus in the gospel of Mark. *Jesus' story begins here, in the water.* And there are no trumpets, decrees, celebrities, political officials or media personal at this inauguration. No speeches. In fact, Jesus doesn't say anything at all in this scene.

He jumps in line with the others waiting to be baptized. Trudges through the Jordan River, filled with dirt, slime, bugs, generally muckiness.

And when he comes up out of the water, he looks up, and the heavens are torn apart. We heard during Advent the passage from Isaiah that read, "Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down to make your name known to your enemies and make the nations tremble at your presence." And now the heavens *are* torn apart. Unlike Matthew and Luke who

say the heavens were *opened*, Mark intentionally uses a form of the word *schidzomai*, as used in words like schism or schizophrenic. Ripped apart, split open, cannot be closed. Forever altered.

The heavens are *torn* apart. God indeed does come down. But the nations do not tremble. Most probably didn't even notice this extra guy standing in the baptism line at the river. We are not told if anyone else sees the dove or hears the voice from heaven. You'd think the torn apart heavens would have made more of a splash!

Our world does indeed often feel torn apart – internally and externally. The brokenness of poverty, racism, families torn apart, nations torn apart, our own spirits torn apart and left wounded and raw. Voices within and without telling us what to do and who we are. The cacophony of voices schisming inside our heads and hearts.

And there is no shortage of voices telling us how to fix this tear. How to seal it back up. Urgent imperatives plague us like last year's unmet new year's resolutions – lose 10 lbs, eat healthier, pray more, reduce my carbon footprint, spend more time with kids. How many imperatives have we heard this week? Put this on my desk by 5. Telling us – do this, do that.

Would we even hear a voice from heaven in the midst of such demanding noise? Perhaps we too need to head to the wilderness, to the edge, if nothing more than for a moment to listen.

The heavens are torn open and from this ripped open place a voice speaks.

At this moment, one might expect the voice from heaven to say, "Okay, Jesus. Let's get it together. This place is a mess. Here's what you need to do. Mobilize. Move. Quick, quick, quick!"

But God utters no such commands or demands. No urgent imperatives. The words spoken are from God who declares, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." In this inaugural moment, marking the beginning of Jesus' ministry there are no instructions, no list of goals. Only love.

How often do we hear such graceful words, unattached to our duties or responsibilities? And if and when we do, do we believe them?

We are so thirsty for such unconditional love, but can we really soak up what it means to be loved not *because of* or *so that*, but just loved?

"I love you", we hear. But doubts and fears plague us. You wouldn't if you really knew me.... Yah, well, that's the funny thing. God does know. And knowing us, loves us.

But this love in baptism is not neat and clean. It calls us to live differently. Maybe not with clothes of camel's hair, or diets of locusts, but this water will push us further to the edge, open our eyes to those torn apart places, invite us to encounter people and places we'd rather avoid, and join us to a strange and wonderful community.

These waters are challenging. In fact, immediately after Jesus' baptism, he is thrust into the wilderness where he will face temptations and struggle. And he has no rule book to go by, no instructions to follow. But echoing in his ear are the words echoed from heaven, "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Can such love sustain us in our wilderness times?

Or are the noises of life and demands and expectations drowning out this still, small voice? Perhaps. Which is why we meet again and again at the fountain, remembering the story of water and hearing the promises of God. Because *our story begins here, in the water*. In this mysterious and messy baptismal water. As messy as a mother's water breaking before the birth of a child, as messy as Jordan River water and torn apart heavens, as messy as trying to be community in an individualistic world, as messy as joining a new church community that comes with flaws as well as faith.

Ozana, Johnny and Saran, you have affirmed your baptism today and become part of this particular community of faith, in this edge of God's kingdom. You are trudging in these mucky waters with us. And as the waters claim you once again today, may they claim us all – beloved.

You are my child, the beloved; with you I am well pleased. Let that soak in. In fact, let it drench you.