

“WHEN THE SPIRIT SAYS”

GENESIS 1: 1-5; MARK 1: 4-11

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University Church of Chicago

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What do you do when you're not sure? That's the topic of my sermon today. You look for God's direction and can't find it. On September 11, 2001 when the World Trade Center and part of the Pentagon were demolished by hijacked aircraft and United Flight 93 crashed in Pennsylvania, who among us did not experience the most profound disorientation. Despair. "What now? Which way? What do I say to my kids? What do I tell myself?" It was a time of people sitting together, bound together by a common feeling of hopelessness. But think of that! Your *bond* with your fellow beings was your *despair*. It was a public experience, shared by everyone in our society. It was awful, but we were in it together! How much worse it is then for the lone man, the lone woman, stricken by a private calamity? "No one knows I'm sick. No one knows I've lost my last real friends. No one knows I've done something wrong." Imagine the isolation. You see the world as through a window. On the one side of the glass: happy, untroubled people. On the other side: you. Something has happened, you have to carry it, and it's incommunicable. For those so afflicted, only God knows their pain. Their secret. The secret of their alienating sorrow. And when such a person, as they must, howls to the sky, to God: Help me!" What if no answer comes? Silence. I want to tell you a story. A cargo ship sank and all her crew was drowned. Only this one sailor survived. He made a raft of some spars and, being, of a nautical discipline, turned his eyes to the Heavens and read the stars. He set a course for his home, and, exhausted, fell asleep. Clouds rolled in and blanketed the sky. For the next twenty nights, as he floated on the vast ocean, he could no longer see the stars. He thought he was on course but there was no way to be certain. As the days rolled on, and he wasted away with fevers, thirst and starvation, he began to have doubts. Had he set the course right? Was he still going on towards home? Or was he horribly lost and doomed to a terrible death? No way to know. The message of the constellations—had he imagined it because of his desperate circumstance? Or had he seen Truth once, and now had to hold on to it without further reassurance? That was his dilemma on a voyage without apparent end. There are those of you in church today who know exactly the crisis of faith I describe. I want to say to you: Doubt can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty. When you are lost, you are not alone.

That sermon, of course, serves as the opening of the first act of one of the most provocative plays of our generation. It is preached by Father Flynn in James Patrick Shanley's drama, "Doubt"—now a wonderful motion picture starring Philip Seymour Hoffman and Meryl Streep. I made one adaptation, moving the initial moment from November 23, 1963 to September 11, 2001.

The Gospel, you see, is down to earth, grounded in the real, tactile, sensual, fleshy world. In these few opening verses of Mark's Gospel are references to river water, clothing from camels, diet from bugs, and trying shoes and a bird. The Spirit is characterized in the Bible not as lighter than matter, but heavier. Spirit is always tied to material—real water, real bread, inexpensive wine, baptismal robes for children, soaking clothes for adults. It is no wonder that Archbishop Temple called Christianity “the most materialistic of the world's religions.”

Doubt is, as Paul Tillich declared, not the opposite of faith but rather a vital part of any living faith. Jesus' baptism by John begins his public ministry, which points always to Golgotha where the dangerous title he is given at the Jordan, “This is my Son, the Beloved,” reaches its climax. All the doubts and suffering are made real throughout his ministry because he joins the ranks of penitent sinners and accepts God's will in whatever form it is presented.

When the African-American poet and novelist, Alice Walker, was still virtually unknown, just a black woman in Tallahassee, Florida, trying to learn her craft, the pastor of the all-white First Presbyterian Church in that city invited her to give a reading on Martin Luther King's birthday. Ms. Walker stood in the chancel of the church, looked up at the balcony which had originally served as a slave gallery, and said, “I see ghosts up there in that gallery. I see little black women in their kerchiefs and long dresses, and I see wizened old African men in their only black suits, white shirts and string ties. They are smiling on us tonight. They are giving a blessing to whatever understanding and progress we may be trying to make.”

The story of Jesus' baptism and the voice of God giving approval is crucial. It is a new beginning—for Him and for us. Jesus has come to the Jordan to fulfill God's promise. It's that simple. Mark does not psychologize the moment. He does not speculate about what goes on in the mind of either the Baptizer or the Messiah. He does not encourage us to raise questions about whether Jesus knew he was the Son of God or had some unique relation to God before the baptism or whether his baptism was the occasion when his mission became clear to Him. As Fred Craddock has said, “That is the stuff of novels, not of Gospels.” The church has lived all these centuries with the supreme paradox about Jesus: he was both fully human and fully divine. At the same time. Not three-quarters human and one-quarter divine. Not mostly divine and only partly human.

It is important on the First Sunday after Epiphany when we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord to affirm that Christian baptism is a matter of obedience and receiving the Spirit for us just as it was for Jesus.

Let's look at that business about obedience, about living through our doubts and finding in them truth. Obedience is not a word we like to hear. We twenty-first century, sophisticated, well-educated folks know what's right and what's wrong. We deal all the time in shades of gray in our relationships and ethics. We are logical, reasonable people. We read our Bible through Enlightenment eyes (if we read the Bible at all), so we do not want to be told about commandments and duties and things we have to do.

Rick Warren, against my wishes, will deliver the invocation at President Barack Obama's inauguration next Tuesday. Warren has written two books, *The Purpose Driven Church* and *The Purpose Driven Life*, that have sold millions of copies and have been studied by hundreds of thousands of Christians. Why do

you think those books have been so popular? The answer is both obvious and simple: most individuals like most churches function mostly on automatic pilot. We live with so little direction in our lives, so little motivating, energizing purpose. We make it through the day, day after day. We don't like living like that, but it becomes comfortable after a while, easier than making changes. We get up, go to work, earn our money, do what's necessary, come home and watch that instrument which has shot a hole in the brains of the American public.

Churches keep doing the same things the same way year after year, then wonder why new people are not attracted to their congregations. We should write over the door of almost every mainline Protestant church in America, the Seven Last Words of the Church: WE ALWAYS DO EVERYTHING THE SAME WAY.

If baptism means anything, it means purpose, new direction, following a new path. That's what repentance means—not just saying you're sorry for your sins. It means turning around and taking a new path.

A businessman notorious for his ruthlessness once announced to Mark Twain: "Before I die, I intent to take a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I will climb Mount Sinai and read the Ten Commandments aloud at the top of the mountain."

"I have a better idea," said Twain. "You could stay home in Boston and keep them."

Baptism is about obedience to God's will. It is about receiving God's Holy Spirit which changes us and gives us purpose. It is about facing who we are and whose we are.

When Jesus comes to be baptized by John, he comes as we do: as one on a journey of faith, as one who is moving away from the old ways (his home, his security in Galilee) into a new life, a way of life that he described as although "foxes have holes and birds have their nests, the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

The early church, you see, had a difficult time explaining why Jesus, the Son of God, the Anointed One, the Messiah, had to be baptized in the first place. "I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals," says the Baptizer. But to understand Jesus as a pilgrim like us, a sojourner, a person on the way, is to be in tune with the pictures of Him in the Gospels. He moves constantly around the Galilee, through its towns and villages until he sets his face toward Jerusalem, toward persecution and misunderstanding and even death. But always there is that voice speaking—sometimes silently, sometimes only to Him, but always through Him to us.

Malcolm Muggeridge was for many years a fierce opponent of Christianity. He was a British television personality; very forceful, very certain that the whole business of faith was a fraud. Then, in middle-age, he made a major turnabout—or, rather, God turned him around. He became a Christian, answered God's call and was baptized. He wrote about the living water of baptism:

"I may, I suppose, regard myself, or pass for being, a relatively successful man. People occasionally stare at me in the streets—that's fame. I can fairly easily earn enough money to qualify for admission to the higher slopes of Internal Revenue—that's success.

“Furnished with money and a little fame, even the elderly, if they care to, may partake of trendy diversions—that’s pleasure. It might happen once in a while that something I said or wrote was sufficiently heeded for me to persuade myself that it represented a serious impact on our time—that’s fulfillment.

“Yet I say to you, and I beg you to believe me, multiply these tiny triumphs by a million, add them all together, and they are nothing—less than nothing, a positive impediment—measured against one drop of that living water Christ offers to the spiritually thirsty, irrespective of who or what they are. What, I ask myself, does life hold, what is there in the works of time, in the past, now and to come, which could possibly be put in the balance against the refreshment of drinking that water?”

The physicist Leo Slizard once announced to his friend Hans Bethe that he was thinking of keeping a diary. “I don’t intend to publish it,” he said. “I am merely going to record the facts for the information of God.”

“Don’t you think,” Bethe asked, “that God knows the facts?” “Yes,” said Slizard. “He knows the facts, but He does not know this version of the facts.”

Baptism reminds us that there is more than “facts.” Facts are not enough and our version of them is always skewed.

Baptism means that we are forgiven for our sins. We still live in sin, but our sins are forgiven. We are, as Martin Luther characterized us, “forgiven sinners.”

In the Catholic church, Our Lady of Guadalupe in the French Quarter of New Orleans, there is a statue, the only one of its kind in all the world. It is a statue of St. Expedite, an un-canonized saint of the Church. When the box arrived years ago with the statue enclosed, the word “expedite” was written on the outside of the box. The parishioners opened the box and placed the statue in the nave of the church. They mistakenly but faithfully named him, “St. Expedite.”

That is my kind of saint: one who hurries God along, one who, like me and I think like most of you, wants God to hurry up.

Near the end of his life, someone asked Albert Outler what he had learned over all his years of preaching, writing and teaching. “Early in my ministry, I would tell people, ‘You’ve got to love. You’ve got to love. You’ve got to love.’ Now I have grown to realize that ‘You get to love. You get to love. You get to love.’”

God interrupts our neat little categories, our denials and evasions when we are reminded of our baptism. God keeps putting before us the choice between life as it is and life as it can be. Not between good and evil so much as between the good and the best. We get to love. We get to love all of God’s children. Because we are unconditionally, faithfully loved by the One whose Spirit speaks to us and changes us.