

Message for January 7, 2018

"The Dove: Mark's Christmas Story"

Genesis 1:1-8

NIV.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ² Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

³ And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. ⁴ God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

⁶ And God said, "Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water." ⁷ So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. ⁸ God called the vault "sky." And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.

Mark 1:4-11

NIV

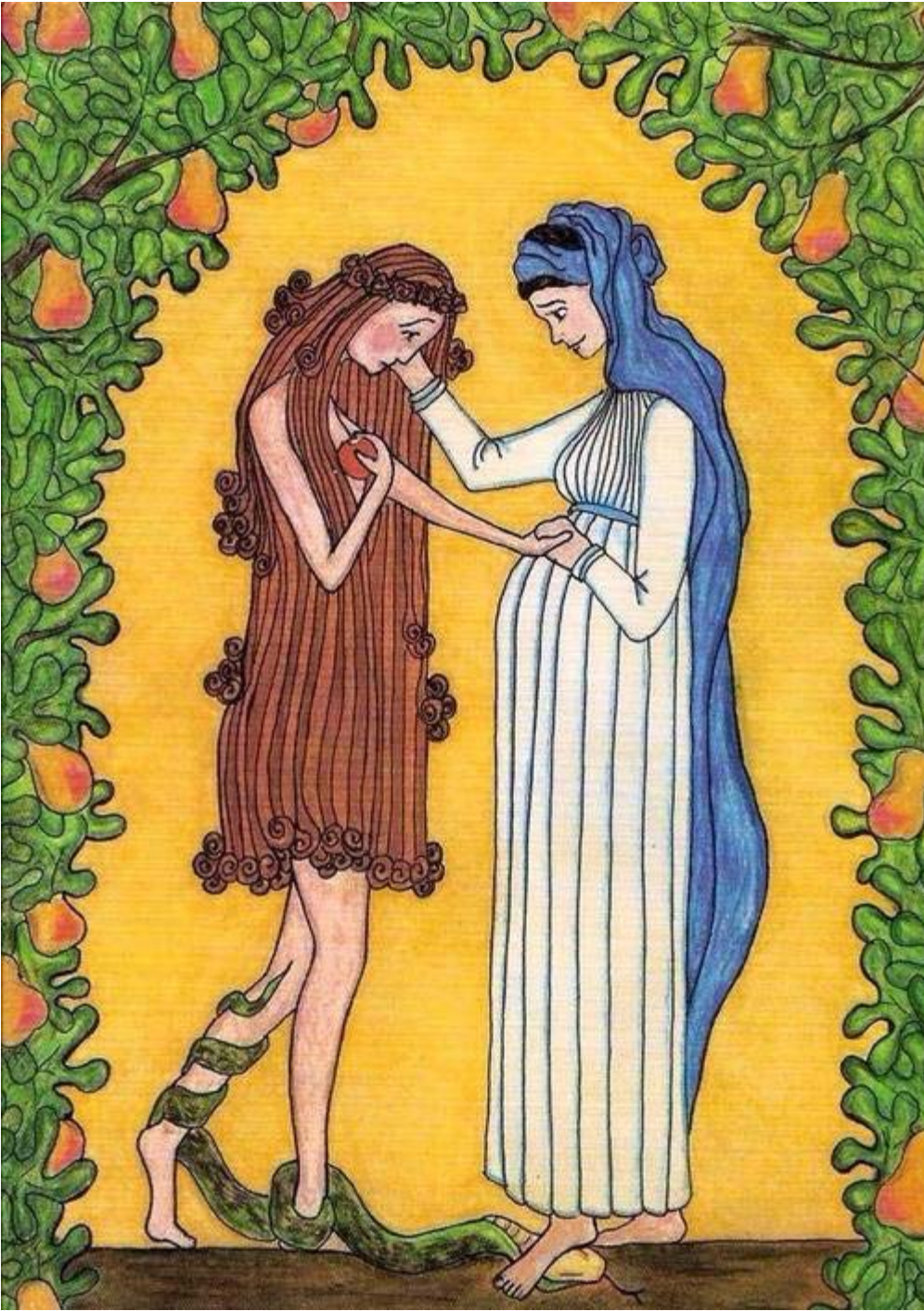
⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Prayer:

1. A few days ago, one of the members of our Friday men's group sent Art and me this picture.
 - a. Take a few moments and ponder this picture ---- what do you see?
 - b. Ask the congregation what they are seeing?
 - c. Mary – a very pregnant Mary --- with a compassionate expression --- Mary is consoling Eve.
 - d. Eve – a very repentant person --- notice how her head is tilted downward.

- e. It's all about the baby that Mary is caring --- The baby Jesus
- f. Look at the entanglement of the snake – circling Eve's legs, but Mary is crushing the serpent's head. --- this is showing the defeat of the devil by the power of the baby – Jesus that she is caring!
- g. God is using our feet to trample the devil.
- h. The picture is also about hope --- Mary giving hope to Eve --- hope through understanding and courage



2.

3. This picture is a good way to put into perspective what Christmas is all about. The coming of Jesus --- as the Savior of the World.

4. The good news is that we don't have to find God. God has reached out to find us. Adam and Eve went out and hid themselves in the garden.

- a. They did not even want to find God, for they feared His judgment for their disobedience.
 - b. They weren't sure what "death" was, but it did not sound pleasant.
 - c. They discovered they had a bad heart.
 - d. But God came searching for them. He did not leave them there in desperate fear and brokenness. Yes, there would be severe chastisement. They would be thrown out of the garden. The earth would be cursed, and their children cursed with death and decay.
 - e. But this was not the end of the story.
5. Paul tells us at the right time, God sent His Son, born of a woman, a birth we have just finished celebrating.
- a. His Son was not a broken human being like we are.
 - b. He had it all together.
 - c. He was in perfect communion with the Father in heaven and perfectly did the will of He who sent Him to earth.
 - d. Despite His perfection, he was allowed to feel our forsakenness.
 - e. His perfect body was disfigured by scourging and crucifixion.
 - f. He who deserved all acceptance was rejected by the world.
 - g. Jesus did not come into the world to warm our heart at Christmastime. He came to change us.
6. It is in Jesus Christ that has become the peace of heart to those who believe on Him.
- a. He can give you a new heart and a new life.
 - b. He calls all to repentance, to consider that He alone is the way, the truth, and the life.
 - c. All the idols of our heart only make the tear worse. But Jesus brings healing and true hope.
7. **PAUSE**
8. Today, we remembered the story of Jesus' baptism and rekindling our commitment to Christ and the ministry of the church.
9. It feels a little bit strange to be thinking about the waters of baptism when we are in the midst of piles of snow, icicles, and icy streets and sidewalks and the lowest temperatures in many years. Yet, this is the liturgical season to dive into the waters of God's grace.
10. In the liturgical year, we speed through the early years of Jesus life—celebrating his birth on December 25 and then suddenly in early-January, we read stories of how Jesus is all grown up, wading in the waters of the Jordan River and discovering his call.

11. Let's pause for a moment and think about water.
12. Recently one of the robots was digging in the virgin soil of Mars ---- and there several inches below the surface of the soil was a white spot – about two inches around ---- could it be ice – frozen water ---- and after several minutes the spot disappeared. When the atmospheric temperature is significantly below zero as it is on Mars, water does not melt – it just vaporizes -- ice goes from the solid state to the vapor state – bypassing the liquid water state. This ice had been insulated by the soil and when exposed to the extreme cold of Mars --- it gave up its secret identity to the American scientists.
13. Water on Mars! – Life giving water! --- The question will still remain about life on Mars – but the issue is clear – the substance that makes life on earth possible – water has been found outside of our planet.
14. Water sustains life! In the first chapter of Genesis (which was just read)---on the second day -- God creates water --- the necessary substance for life to emerge and exist as we know it.
15. We are keenly aware that water is absolutely critical for our life and most of us take it for granted --- as we lavishly use water for everything. We are also becoming more cognizant that, in the years to come, water availability will be as critical as oil.
16. Growing vegetation is watered by rain. Humans are nourished in the waters of the womb before they see the light of day. Water cleanses; water nourishes; water is essential to life.
10. Water becomes the symbol of life --- the cleansing effects in our baptism. Jesus was baptized in water.
11. Our Gospel lesson for today from Mark begins with the introduction of John the Baptist (remember Elizabeth and Zachariah's son) who will baptize Jesus.
- a. We have celebrated the birth of Jesus these past several weeks.
 - b. There are no shepherds or Wise men in the Gospel of Mark. There is no inn or Bethlehem story in Mark.
 - c. There is no reference to a pre-existence Jesus as there is in the Gospel of John.
12. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus just appears and is to be baptized by John. Mark introduces John and Jesus as the Gospel is opened by quoting Isaiah 40 – “I am sending my messenger ---- prepare the way of the Lord.”
13. Jesus is simply baptized --- as a sign of the launch of Jesus' public ministry – and reconfirmed by God as the Holy Spirit descends as a dove from heaven – and a voice came from heaven – “You are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.”
- a. Jesus begins his ministry.

A. Jesus' baptism is hard to explain and a little embarrassing. Why would the Christ, the child of God, submit to a baptism of repentance? If baptism is for the forgiveness of sins and Jesus is sinless, then what does Jesus' baptism mean?

B. The Gospel of Matthew points out that John the Baptist himself was uneasy and hesitant. While the Gospel of Luke makes as little of the event as possible, casually mentioning that Jesus was baptized after mentioning that John the Baptist is in prison. Mark only allows Jesus' baptism three verses. The church has trouble explaining this story.

C. This story is difficult, in part, because John the Baptist is difficult. John storms out of the wilderness, eating locusts and washing them down with honey, proclaiming a new kingdom, coming in water and fire, and warning— especially the religious people—of the wrath to come. John's baptism is revolutionary. He treats Jews like Jews treated pagan converts, requiring them to be baptized, calling them to repentance.

D. Surprisingly, crowds flock to John to be baptized; but he knows his work is preparatory and partial. After him one will come who will baptize not in water but in Spirit. The day soon comes when this one wades out into the muddy Jordan. When Jesus comes up out of the water, he sees heaven split wide open and the Spirit descending like a dove. He hears the voice of God saying, "This is my child."

E. The people gathered on the shore have no idea what it all means. They probably assume that Jesus is now one of John's disciples. Without the rest of Jesus' life his baptism is incomprehensible.

F. The purpose of Jesus' baptism is seen in the days and years that follow that afternoon in the Jordan. It's when we see Jesus take his place with hurting people that his baptism starts to make sense. Jesus' baptism in the Jordan foreshadows his baptism on the cross. Baptism is Jesus' commissioning for ministry.

15. Baptism is one of two sacraments in most Christian churches. The other is Holy Communion.

A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of the inward and invisible grace of God. What makes a sacrament sacred is that:

a. God is actively involved in the sacrament! God is actively involved in the sacrament!

16. Go Slow

17. Just as we read in Mark --- God's actions of blessing Jesus are shown as the descending dove and the voice from heaven.

18. One thing that brings us to church on Sunday is the fact that we were baptized.
- Some of us were baptized without being given any choice in the matter.
 - Some of us were baptized because we turned thirteen years old and decided that we needed to join the church and also be able to take communion.
 - Some of us have never been baptized because we've never seen any reason why we should be.
19. It's good that we learn the meaning of our baptisms after the fact.
- None of us fully knew what we were doing on the day we were baptized.
 - Years later, as we make our way slowly into faith, the purpose begins to unfold.
 - We discover what our baptisms mean **after the event** rather than before. That's how it was for Jesus too, at least in Mark's Gospel.
20. When Jesus stands up, the waters of the Jordan dripping down his face, he sees the Spirit descending like a dove to rest upon his soggy head.
- The Spirit comes, not as an all-consuming fire of judgment, but with the flutter of hopeful wings. A voice says: "You are my child. I love you. I'm delighted with you."
21. Jesus spends all the days and years that follow that afternoon in the Jordan discovering the meaning of his baptism.
- Jesus gives everything—his dreams and deeds, his labors and his life itself.
 - Jesus gives himself to God's people, takes his place with hurting people.
 - Baptism was Jesus' commissioning to ministry.
22. Baptisms, like most beginnings, find meaning long after the event.
- Beginning is often easy, while finishing is often hard. After the baptism Jesus went into the desert for 40 days --- contemplating his ministry and being certain.
 - The significance of any decision takes a while to emerge.** It takes our whole lives to finish the journey we begin when we're baptized.
23. So what does it mean to us to live out our baptisms?
- If we are true to our baptisms, we **cannot make ourselves comfortable,**
 - cannot do only what will be appreciated,** and
 - cannot be satisfied with the way things are.**

- d. **Our baptisms demand that we struggle with what's right and what's wrong, what's important and what's not.**

24. **Go Slow**

25. Here are some of the attributes of the baptized children of God:

- a. They **tell** the truth in a world that lies,
- b. They **give** in a world that takes,
- c. They **love** in a world that lusts,
- d. They **make** peace in a world that fights,
- e. They **serve** in a world that wants to be served,
- f. They **pray** in a world that waits to be entertained,
- g. They **take chances** in a world that worships safety.
- h. The baptized are citizens of an eccentric community where financial success is not the goal, security is not the highest good, and sacrifice is a daily event.

26. Baptism is our ordination to ministry, our vow to live with more concern for the hurting than for our own comfort, and our promise to take issue with ideas with which everyone else agrees.

Baptism is the commitment to share our time with the poor and listen to the lonely.

27. What did it mean when you were baptized? The meaning of your baptism is seen in what you think, feel, and do this day. Have you done anything today that you wouldn't have done if you had not been baptized? We are forever answering the question "Why was I baptized?"

28. **Almost all of us were baptized as an infant. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, reminds the church that we baptize infants as a reminder to all of us about God's unconditional love for us – which is called grace.**

- a. God's prevenient grace – that is – the grace that goes before us – before we come to acceptance of Jesus as Savior and Lord ---- God loved us even before we were conceived in the womb. Psalm 139 reminds us that we were known by God --- and loved by God before we were born --- Wesley calls this prevenient grace.

29. **Go slowly!**

30. So we baptize infants --- we remind ourselves and the parents as we touch water to the vulnerable head of the infant about the unconditional divine love that God has for the child. We also remind the parents and the congregation that it is through the "Body of Christ", that

is the church, that protection and help in rearing the child – is available. Even if the child is screaming or sleeping during baptism --- we are saying publicly ---- “welcome to the world little one. You are here as part of our family --- you are not alone.

31. Then the parents, sponsors and pastors lay hands on the child (or the person being baptized) with the words: *“May the Holy Spirit work within you, that by being born through water and the Spirit, you may be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ”*

32. But when we baptize – we also wash with water as a symbol of cleansing. Washing away the sins --- an action that God does for us. We are given a fresh start --- but, our human limitations cause us to backslide back into sinning.

33. Of course as all of us know --- somehow, we continue on sinning ----- and our Christian life is an ongoing process of the dying to our old selves and the rising of the new. In our baptism, we are united to Christ in his death and resurrection and it is an ongoing experience.

34. Start the renewal