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Trinity Church in the City of Boston
January 7, 2024
The Baptism of Jesus, Mark 1:4-11

*Christ when for us you were baptized, God's Spirit on you came;
as peaceful as a dove, and yet, as urgent as a flame.¹*
Amen.

Today, we celebrate “Baptism of Our Lord,”² one of the four, primary baptismal feasts of the church year. While Jesus’ baptism opens the Gospel of Mark, for us still emerging from that happy fog of the Christmas season, we tend to muddle the event along with the stage-setting of the other synoptic Gospels. In our liturgical calendar, this story follows:

- . the humble birth of the infant King *in Luke*;³
- . the Holy Family’s escape from the blood-thirsty Herod *in Matthew*;⁴
- . the naming of the Child in the Temple *back in Luke*;⁵ and
- . the faithful journey of the Magi⁶ – again, *in Matthew*.

Related, we tend to associate Gospel moments with the seasons and the settings where and when we hear them, rather than in the context of their peculiar narrative. Though I may think of Jesus’ baptism as an Epiphany story because of that feast’s timing (and in the chronology of Jesus’ life), Mark’s narrative does not know a thing about that “star seen at its rising.”⁷ While the episodic approach of our Lectionary tradition aspires canonical breadth, the devotion can also work against our immersion in the distinctiveness of each Gospel.

Therefore, let us set aside all those other, wonderful tales, and endeavor to encounter Jesus’ baptism in the particulars of Mark’s story.

As meaning-making creatures, you and I, we operate with a “cosmology,” some assembly of ideas about God and the Holy Spirit; about the baptism, ministry, and resurrection of Jesus; about the forces at work around and through us; about our understanding of everything from a Sunday snowstorm to the earth’s location in the cosmos and our place in it – in its creation, in its purposes, in its trajectory. Mark’s Gospel brings its own cosmologies: among others, those of the characters within its “story world,”⁸ those of its authoring community, and those of its first and intended audiences.

If Mark opened with a *Star Wars* crawl – a John Williams score and yellow text sliding into a galactic eternity⁹ – it might read: *Satan and the forces of evil have overturned the creation’s balance and actively antagonize humankind with demons, disease, and natural disaster. Into this*

*cosmic war, a wild man appears. Dressed in camel's hair and cow's hide, he eats locusts, drinks raw honey, and calls people to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*¹⁰

We Episcopalians most often allow these cosmic matters to wash by us – or, in our snobbery, imagine that such primitive notions run *below* us. We prefer the erudition and dignity of sociological and historical studies, and, as the Gospel continues, we will emphasize Jesus' conflicts with the political and religious authorities, rather than his battles with demons ... despite the latter's important role in Mark's world. Realize that we need not adopt these cosmologies as our own to appreciate their impact and influence upon the community of Mark and its characters.

Mark's Gospel orients its story to a flat earth with the dwelling of God above the creation, and the dwelling of the "strong one," Satan, sunk into and below the earth and its territories. The heavens where God dwells include the "canopy" of sun, moon, and stars above the terrestrial realm.¹¹ From the Evangelist's perspective, when Gospel characters in this three-dimensional worldview summit a mountain, they move closer to God – not metaphorically (as our cosmology might impose upon the story), but *literally*.

In the same way, when Mark writes of the "ends of the earth," the Evangelist means the four edges of this flat, square plane, the points of origin for the four winds that blow north and south, east and west. The nation of Israel centers this cosmos, and the Israelites' share their realm with God and angels, Satan and demons, all of whom battle one another across these territories.

In this baptismal moment, the forces of evil have turned God's hopes upside-down: the greedy and the violent have taken what God intended for good – faithfulness to the Law, Temple worship, synagogue community – and turned those gifts toward their own desires, rather than in service of God's hopes. These forces have so disordered the creation that God must fulfill a supernatural oracle – John realizing Isaiah's prophecy of one crying out to "make straight" the path of the Lord.¹² Then, as John baptizes Jesus, the heavenly canopy rips open, and a force, "the Spirit,"¹³ descends on the Nazarene. This swift launch of the Gospel into such raucous action lends the scene a decidedly Mos Eisley, science-fiction feel.¹⁴

In a more contemporary movement between these heavenly and terrestrial realms, a former clergy colleague I knew served as a naval aviator before his ordination as a priest, and he would share how powerful he found the experience of flying over water at night.¹⁵ He described the majesty and transcendence he felt, even as he acknowledged that setting's dangers. Of those perils, he recalled flipping his plane upside-down while passing through a bank of clouds. When he emerged from the inclement weather, he could not distinguish the ocean from the sky.

Physiologists and scientists refer to this condition as "spatial disorientation," the inability for one to determine their body position in space, a vulnerability of underwater divers, as well as aircraft pilots. Losing a visual horizon, aviators' senses fail them, and they – literally – cannot tell up

from down. In 1999, John F. Kennedy, Jr, crashed his plane just off Martha's Vineyard, having suffered this same "spatial disorientation;" perhaps attempting to gain altitude, Kennedy instead nosedived into the water.¹⁶

Among us twenty-first-century, Boston Christians, we suffer our own clouds of inclemency. We take what God has intended for good – our comforts – and we turn those gifts for ill. That is, when we suffer sickness or grief, unemployment or divorce, we operate from a cosmology that imagines God having assembled the creation in service of our convenience and ease. Our sense of entitlement disorients us, and, seeking the simplest path to our equilibrium, we avoid confession, reconciliation, and repair, and we steer *around* our difficulties, rather than *through* them. Yet, when we emerge from the fog and our life demands a meaningful spiritual or emotional landing, we realize we have only deferred our trouble; we discover we have been flying upside-down; and *we crash*.

As my former colleague described his harrowing experience of “spatial disorientation,” he trusted his gauges, despite what his senses told him; he righted the plane; and he landed safely on an aircraft carrier in the middle of an ocean.

While we will not resolve our spatial or spiritual disorientation (or this sermon) with a tidy bumper-sticker solution promising to keep us from all ill – “God Is My Co-pilot,” or some such –

- . realize that Isaiah’s prophecy and John’s preaching declare God’s favor for the faithful and the forgiving.
- . Appreciate that Jesus’ baptism inaugurates the whole creation’s reconciliation with God and turns us right-side, up, again.
- . Take heart that the Spirit’s descent reestablishes belovedness as our orienting horizon.
- . And believe that no matter what we must endure, God will remain our forever and loving companion.

As faithful companions in this household of God,
Amen.

¹ Tucker, F. Bland. “Christ, when for us you were baptized.” *The Hymnal 1982*, The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1985, 121.

² Celebrated on the first Sunday after the Epiphany.

³ Luke 2:1-20.

⁴ Matthew 2:16-18. The Episcopal Church remembers the “Holy Innocents” on December 28.

⁵ Luke 2:21-38. The Church celebrates the feast of the “Holy Name” on January 1.

⁶ Matthew 2:1-12. The Church remembers the Magi’s journey on Epiphany, January 6.

⁷ Matthew 2:2.

⁸ As proposed by David Rhodes, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, in *Mark As Story* (Fortress Press, 2012).

⁹ [My heart still lifts!](#)

¹⁰ Details drawn from *Mark As Story*.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Mark 1:14 (and Isaiah 40:3). We read Mark 1:1-8 on the Second Sunday of Advent. In that season’s context, we emphasize the prophecy of John in light of the quotation from Isaiah, which immediately precedes (1:1-4) today’s Gospel. Today’s appointment comprises the second half of that Advent lesson and then the three verses that follow. On this occasion, we emphasize Jesus’ baptism, carrying forward not only a few lines, but some of Advent’s tensions, as well: on both Sundays, we hear John announce, “I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” – a proclamation we may receive either as reassurance or threat, depending upon our perspective and allegiance.

¹³ Mark 1:10.

¹⁴ [“You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy.”](#)

¹⁵ In one of the great funeral one-liners, his daughter began her eulogy: “The first time my father flew a plane, he was the pilot.” She recalled her dad’s harrowing flight during the same.

¹⁶ [Hard to believe this summer will mark 25 years since his death.](#)