

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

It is helpful to look at the big picture. The whole enchilada, so to speak...laid before us in the roadmap of Scripture known to us as the lectionary. And here we are, newly in Year B of our readings, where gospel focus is primarily in the Gospel according to St. Mark. This gospel is recognized as the oldest of the four in its written context, and it is a different breed altogether....starting with a different beginning for the story of Jesus.

Luke and Matthew start by offering familiar but different birth accounts. Luke tells about the annunciation to Mary, the birth at Bethlehem, and the visit by the shepherds. Matthew tells about Joseph's dream, the gifts of the Magi, and the flight into Egypt. John is different from them both, but only in terms of space and time as he announces that God's Word was before anything was made, and then makes the great proclamation: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.

But Mark? There is nothing about the birth of Jesus or his early years. Nothing about the Word made flesh. Nada. Instead, Mark's story begins with the baptism of Jesus at the hands of John. In this gospel, Jesus walks on to the stage as a grown man.

The other three gospels reveal their entire plots with those grand openings. The highest points. The grand opening arias. The overriding theme that gets filled in with the detail throughout the continuing story.

In Matthew: the visit and gifts of the Magi, recognizing right off the very manifestation of God's own, right before them....and how that affirmation echoes throughout that story.

In Luke: over the manger, the angel is joined by the heavenly host, heard to sing praises to God over the birth of this child, "Glory to God in the highest!"... also consistently reaffirmed throughout that gospel story with the life and message of Jesus continually glorifying God.

And in John: proclaiming the indescribable and almost completely incomprehensible gift of God to all creation, intended from even before the initial creation, of having God's Word become flesh like us in every respect, so that solely by God's grace, we might have a chance of being who we...you and I...were born to be.

But, what about Mark? If each of the other three have their separate equivalents of a Christmas story, the story that announces the birth of God's new plan of salvation for us, then what is the singular, huge, opening number in Mark? Where is the big punch line here?

Well, for Mark, what is essential...what might be the summary of this gospel in a single phrase...is the message Jesus hears when he goes down under the river water in solidarity with the entire wretched

human race, and jumps up out of the water again. The heavens are torn apart, like sheets being ripped up for rags, and he can see...imagine this....can see the Spirit descend on him, and a voice fills his ears and all the depths of his soul: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Here is the great mystery of this day, the day of our Lord's baptism, which makes it worthy of a feast. Jesus accepts baptism as an act of solidarity with the entire human race. On the banks of the Jordan, it is an enactment for all the world to see, of what it means for the Word to become flesh there in the womb of the Blessed Mother Mary.

We will renew our baptismal vows today instead of the Nicene Creed because his baptism story is also a Christmas story for us. Emmanuel. God with us. God among us. God for us all. Every last one, without regard for anything. God for us all, down to the last and worst and ugliest sinner among us. And that is what Christian baptism and living the baptismal life is all about. God comes to engage in a life of solidarity with us, and we can also do so in return.

Our baptism into Jesus means we hear the same voice he hears. It is the same for us as it was for him. Today is special feast day for us, all in white....the same message from heaven is aimed at us.

"You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased." We might think that to be an outrageous, unacceptable statement when directed to ourselves. But who asked for our opinion? That is why it is good news. It is God who says this about Jesus and about us. Who are you or I to disagree?

Each one of us has a calling. And that is to do whatever we have to do to remember this, and not forget that God says to each of us personally, "You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased."

Some people say that Christianity is a matter of believing. There is some truth in that. Some people say that Christianity is a matter of doing. There is some truth in that. But there is another piece, without which all the rest will fall apart. Christianity is also a matter of listening.

Listening. For the message from heaven. For what Jesus heard at his baptism. For the same message spoken to us day by day in the cracks and crevices of our lives. We do not have to be up to our waist in muddy river water to hear it, coming like a bolt from heaven. By the grace of God, it will be heard....as a whisper, as a shout. Some days it might seem like a mumble, and often not discernable at all.

But the message is there. And it is ours, by the love and grace of God, through our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a message to you and me, one that we hear again, renewed in our own baptismal covenant, by saying "yes" again to the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

It is the most basic calling of our lives, each of us. The real reason we are even born to live in the first place. We are, all of us, learning time and time again to listen, to listen to the right voice, to get in line with the constant message of God, longing to be one with us:

"You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased."

It is with the fullest heart, and the deepest sense of thanksgiving to Almighty God, that I have shared

this with you in the name of the God manifest at the baptism of our Lord, as the Father, and as the Son, and as the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

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