

Genesis 1:1-5, Romans 6:1-11, Mark 1:4-11

The Situation

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At the beginning of Advent, the very beginning, in the first reading from Isaiah 64, the Prophet Isaiah gave voice to Judah's desire—that God would rend the heavens and come down, that he would be real, that he would be near, approachable. Real, as during the Exodus: real, leading them by a pillar of fire and cloud, feeding them daily bread, giving them fresh water to drink.

“O that you would rend the heavens and come down... to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!” (Isaiah 64:1—2)

What Isaiah prayed for is fulfilled this morning in Mark, at the baptism of Jesus. As our Lord is emerging from the waters of the Jordan he sees the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending upon him, dove-like.

This is the season we call Epiphany, it is a time when God manifests himself to the world. And that manifestation begins with the appearance of St. John the Baptist in the wilderness. As the Children of Israel become a nation and make their beginning in the wilderness, in the days of Moses; so also the next installment of God's work begins for us in the wilderness.

And John appears. He is oddly dressed. His diet is Spartan and meager. He is a mighty preacher who inspired repentance and through baptism he offered grace, that is forgiveness and the mercy of God. But they haven't seen anything yet. Through his preaching he sets their sights on another, on someone to follow—one mightier and stronger and more charismatic than John himself. John baptizes with water, but the Promised One, the Messiah, the Redeemer—he will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

And in those days, as John is preaching, Jesus from Nazareth steps out of the crowd. He joins those going down into the water; he joins them in John's sacred washing. Coming out of the water Jesus sees the heavens “torn apart” (sounds a little violent, storm-like) and the Spirit flutters downward, “as if it were a dove.”

And he heard the voice of God proclaim him “My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” It is Epiphany and God makes himself known. It is

Epiphany and we celebrate God's rending the fabric of nature, his coming from the realms of glory to join humankind.

What Does this Mean?

- The holy One (Jesus) lives for a while among sinful mortals
- There *is a way* from heaven to earth and earth to heaven
- It means that God is concerned with mortals; it may even mean that he is concerned (as some have suggested) with us as individuals
- It means God still has a concern in his heart for his creation, and for his creatures

At the incarnation, when Jesus was conceived within Mary's womb, *then* God breached the great divide between heaven and earth. Today at his baptism Jesus breaches another divide, the one between God and me (or you). It is said that Jesus becomes one with us, if not one of us in Baptism. He becomes the mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5).

Forgive my redundancy here. But I believe I have preached more often on Romans 6:1-11 than any other text. Romans 6 is that important. I could say that Romans 6 symbolically unites us to Christ. But it's more than symbol. Baptism is the rite of Water and the Word, the sacrament which incorporates us into the life of Christ and his Church. Jesus' baptism becomes our own; we are baptized into his death and resurrection.

Says St. Paul, "if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him." "You must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Again, in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul says:

"Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised..., and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

"Death is swallowed up in victory."

"O death, where is your victory?"

O death, where is your sting?"

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

What Does Jesus' Baptism Mean?

It means that we are united to the life of Jesus; Jesus crucified for our sins and raised for our justification. Ours is the hope of eternal life. A hope, sure and certain, not a wish.

The Word of the Lord.