

The Baptism of Our Lord (B/RCL)

Mark 1.4-11

January 11, 2009

Holy Trinity, Manasquan

Have you ever noticed **just** when we think we're almost on top of things, something weird happens to make us realize how **crazy** life is and how **out of control** we can easily become??

My **silliest** adventure last week occurred in the Jersey Shore Medical Center parking lot . I had gone with Pastor Mark for one of his treatments, but stayed in the car when we got there to make a phone call while he went inside. He locked the doors and asked me if I wanted to keep the ignition key. I said no, because I wasn't going to be long and didn't need to **start** the car, just **exit** it. I wouldn't need the key to do **that**, right ☺?

I finished the phone call, packed up my stuff to take inside, and reached to my right to flip the door lock open. It immediately snapped back to the locked position and the car siren began to sound. I quickly hit the lock release button. No luck. I reached over and flipped the driver's side door lock, then the driver's side release. No luck. The alarm was still blaring, for what seemed like another 5 minutes. Finally, after an eternity, the siren stopped and blessed silence returned. "Ah, it's reset itself," I thought. "I'll try again. This time I won't touch the lock itself, just the release button." I did – and you guessed it -- the alarm went off **again**. At this point there was a school child walking down the sidewalk on the other side of the street and looking at me very strangely. No one else seemed to be around. I thought, "Good thing no one **is** trying to steal the car. Nobody would stop them!" Another ten years passed with the car siren blaring. Then silence again.

"Hmmm," I thought. "Definition of insanity: do it the same way and expect a different outcome. What can I do differently, so Mark doesn't come outside in another hour and a half and find me still sitting here? I'll call him, on the off-chance his treatment hasn't started yet, and

he can give his keys to someone.” *Ring, ring!* No answer. Voicemail. Not good. “Okay, it’ll be embarrassing, but I’ll call hospital security.” I did. No one answered ☺. Alright, I think I have the number for the outpatient treatment center. Dear Donna, the happy, helpful receptionist at the welcome desk, answered the phone. “Donna, it’s Mary Farnham, Mark’s wife. I’m either going to laugh or cry. I’m locked inside his car in the parking lot and I can’t get out.” Not surprisingly, Donna laughed. She also immediately volunteered to get Mark’s keys and free me from my prison. I later found out the nurse had to fish the keys from Mark’s pocket, because he had an IV running into each arm and couldn’t use his hands. A few minutes later I heard the “click” of the door locks popping open. Sure enough, as I turned around and looked through the rear window, Donna was striding toward me, having pressed the remote release. I sprang out of the car and gave her a hug. **She** graciously thanked **me** for brightening her day with a good laugh.

And just as Jesus was coming up out of the water,
 he saw the heavens **torn apart**
 and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.
 Mark 1.10

St. Matthew and St. Luke write that the heavens were “**opened**” (Matt. 3.16 & Luke 3.21) after Jesus was baptized, but St. Mark says the heavens were “**torn apart.**” Later in St. Mark’s Gospel, after Jesus breathes His last on the cross, Mark reports,

And the curtain of the temple was **torn** in two, from top to bottom.
 Mark 15.38

That which is **opened**, can often be simply and seamlessly closed. That which is **torn** never looks quite the same again.

St. Mark doesn’t mince words. We’re getting ready to begin a five week Bible study on his Gospel, and we’ll see over and over that he is concise, to-the-point, more like a journalist than a poet. The heavens are **torn** open over Jesus as He stands in the Jordan; God the Father has **torn** open the ceiling which has divided heaven and earth, by sending His Beloved Son. The

curtain in the temple separating the Holy of Holies where God dwells from the rest of the worship space is **orn** from top to bottom. Through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross God has acted to **tear down** the wall which has long divided God and humanity. The curtain lies in tatters on the ground, a relic of the separation **caused** by our selfishness and sin, a reminder of alienation **overcome** by God's saving act.

Before Jesus came to save us from our sins, we were locked inside a car with no way out. Help had to come from the outside! Liberation, freedom came to the world when Jesus was born and died and rose again. That salvation comes to us personally in Holy Baptism. This weekend three children, Zachary Allen, Kiersten Joann and Logan Scott will mysteriously die to sin and rise to newness of life through water and the Word. They will be baptized into Christ's death and resurrection. The Holy Spirit who hovered over the waters of chaos "in the beginning" and who descended upon Jesus at His baptism, will set up housekeeping within them, just as that same Spirit dwells within us, making each of us a temple of the Holy Spirit, as St. Paul says.

Birth is a beginning. Baptism is a beginning, a rebirth. The lesson from Genesis this weekend is made up of the first five verses of the entire Bible, beginning, "In the beginning" (Gen. 1.1). The New Revised Standard Version of Scripture which we're using, says:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. (Gen. 1.1-2)

The Hebrew word translated as wind, *ruah*, is the same word used for breath and spirit. The translation we often hear of this verse is "the Spirit of God" moved over the waters. I love the Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem which talks about how "the holy Ghost broods over the bent world with warm breast, and ah! bright wing." Jesus died to save this world, but it is still "bent", assaulted by sin. God said, "Let there be light!" but there are still pockets of darkness with which we have to contend. The Holy Spirit hovered over the chaos and God brought forth the

creation “way back when”, but we still have our fair share of confusion to muddle through right now.

Remnants of chaos are everywhere. There are laughable things like being locked in a car, life-threatening things like dangerous illness or deployment to a combat zone, and life-shaking things like being downsized or divorced or destitute. There is also the chaos called sin which is capable of blotting out the Light who is God’s Son. The gift of God in Holy Baptism, though, is grace to be raised up, day after day, from the little deaths we die along the Way. The gift of God in Holy Baptism is the strong presence of God outside whatever locked car we find ourselves in, coming to our eternal rescue, whenever we send out a spiritual SOS. The gift of God in Holy Baptism is the divine tearing open of the heavens and reaching down from on high to save us. Every time. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham