

NAURC worship 10th January 2021, Epiphany 2: The baptism of Jesus

Reading:

Mark 1: 4-11 (NRSVA version)

⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

The Baptism of Jesus

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Sermon

> Location, location, location – a popular cliché used by property experts that describes the three most important factors in determining the desirability of a property. It appeared in print as early as 1926 and is also the title of a popular TV programme today. It's also one of the key factors in today's Gospel reading.

> We have begun a year of Bible readings from Mark – which is the shortest Gospel and tells the narrative at an almost abbreviated pace and today's reading is no exception.

> Matthew begins his Gospel by describing the birth of Jesus and Luke goes into even more detail about it. John tells the story of Jesus' involvement with creation. Mark skips over all of Jesus' early years and begins in the wilderness with John the Baptist – straight into the action.

> It feels to me like Mark has been edited down to the bare essentials - so each detail kept in matters. Thus, the location of the baptism of Jesus must be seen as important. But why?

> To start with the wilderness is a place where, throughout the Old Testament, God connects with people, and speaks to them.

> Think of the example of God speaking to Moses in the burning bush, the still small voice Elijah heard when he was on the run. And there is Jacob seeing the ladder (or stairway) to heaven. Abraham and Sarah meet the three visitors whilst camping in the middle of nowhere who give them the news that they are to be the parents of nations. All these moments of connection took place in the wilderness.

> But what is the significance of the location?

> In an excellent commentary on this passage, URC minister Lawrence Moore, says that the importance of the wilderness is as a place far from the city where revolutions start beyond the control of the ruling powers.

As he writes: “locating Jesus in the wilderness emphasises what Mark has said in his opening verse: the message and ministry of Jesus is a resistance movement. Jesus is God’s one-person invasion force, because he exemplifies and personifies the Kingdom of God. It is *this* Kingdom that will stand forever, not Rome’s. He alone is the true Son of God, worthy of worship – not Caesar.”

(<http://disclosingnewworlds.net/baptism-of-jesus-year-b/>)

> Lawrence is writing from a liberation theology viewpoint and I agree that this has a lot to commend it. This is especially true for those people in our world suffering persecution. It is also another example of how the Gospel speaks to differing situations.

> Whilst I was thinking through how this passage speaks to our situation, I came up with another angle that I’d like to share with you and expand on for a while.

> The idea is that the wilderness is the exact opposite of the city.

> The city of Jerusalem, especially in first century Palestine, must have been such a different place to anywhere else. Filled with stone buildings, packed with people and noise. And right in the centre on the summit of the hill was the great temple. It must have been the biggest building many people would ever see. The aesthetic impact of it must have been enormous too as it was designed to leave people in awe of God. For the temple was where it was believed God connected with earth in the Holy of Holies, in the heart of the temple where only the top priests could enter.

> The city was also the place where the rich and powerful were to be found. The ones with the fine clothes and jaw-dropping jewels. It was also the place where authority was enforced by temple guards and the feared Roman Military.

> The city was the centre of temporal *power* and it was the place God lived and it was the place that pilgrims travelled to.

> Now imagine the exact *opposite*.

> A nowhere place that was empty of anything – no people, no buildings. A place that is wild, barren and hostile to life. Not the place you wished to go to visit.

> Yet this is where Mark begins the first scene of his Gospel – the wilderness.

> First to step into the foreground of our attention is John.

> Again, think the opposite of the stereotypical high priest. No fine robes adorned with gems – the person facing you in your mind’s eye is a wild man for the wilderness. He’s dressed in camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist.

> This wild weirdo was, in fact, the one who brought news of world-changing importance!

> People knew there was something special about this baptiser down by the river and instead of people making their way to Jerusalem – they left the city to head into the wilderness.

- > John spoke of someone who was about to arrive – someone far, far greater than he was. John was insistent that he was only the messenger.
- > Then, from out of the crowd of people waiting to be baptised steps forward yet another fairly ordinary man – well except he was a Galilean, not the best regarded of Jews as Galilee was a place full of gentiles.
- > Anyway, it was the turn of this nondescript person to go down into the river under John's guidance - and then everything changed.
- > Our attention is no longer on John – his role has faded into the background, his is now, literally, as a supporting character.

> The vital moment of the opening scene of the Gospel takes place, we are told that (in *The Message* translation):

“The moment Jesus came up out of the baptismal waters, the skies opened up and he saw God's Spirit—it looked like a dove—descending and landing on him. And along with the Spirit, a voice: “This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life.” (Mark 4: 16&17)

- > Once more, in the wilderness, God speaks.
- > This is the moment when an ordinary someone in the crowd that nobody recognised (possibly other than John according to Matthew's Gospel) is revealed as *God's Son!*
- > This was quite different to so many expectations of the arrival of the Messiah – just as was His birth.
- > We do well to remember that it is God's agenda and priorities that matter and not a narrative that fits within the presuppositions of our society or religious practices.
- > In this season of Epiphany, we read of another moment of the revelation of who Jesus is. The words of God are quite clear-cut and unambiguous – Jesus is God's Son – the chosen one and the arrival of the Holy Spirit denotes the start of His ministry.

> So much for a little Bible study – and I'd now like to draw on a couple of points from this text that I think connect with our particular situation in a very different location in very different times.

- > Firstly, I'd like to return to the theme of location.
- > I reflected that where God was to be found and where Jesus was baptised was in a river out in the wilderness. This was an opposite place. This was an unexpected place.
- > This pivotal moment in history did not take place in the great temple, and it was not ushered in by the high priest in all his finery.

> God's voice was heard by those who left the centre of expectations to venture into the scary wilderness.

> I have been reflecting that this location can speak to us in our current situation.

> Our church buildings are closed to keep us all safe – it's not possible to go to the place where we may have expectations of hearing from or encountering God. Maybe there is something to think over about our expectations, and have them challenged by the wilderness location of this story?

> This current national lockdown does feel very much like a time of wilderness – not literally – but certainly socially, perhaps spiritually too. I agree that it is difficult to adapt to worship like this as we meet one another through the medium of a screen.

> These are not normal times at all, they are challenging in all sorts of ways. I think they present our faith with considerable challenges too. The comfort of the familiar, dare I say 'comfortable' surroundings of friends and church building has been suspended.

> We find ourselves in a whole new situation. Is this a challenge to reconsider how our faith works out? Is this wilderness time an opportunity to travel away from expectations to find something new this Epiphany time?

> This could be a time to discover something new, the wilderness may be a place for discovering a surprise.

> Second, as I mentioned earlier, John the Baptist who was centre stage at the start of Mark's story points away from himself to the one who is to come. And then as Jesus comes up out of the water John fades into the background, his supporting, signposting role over.

> This is a model for how we can all share our faith. It is the understanding of our Reformed tradition that the priestly role is something we share – and it's worth being reminded that the role is not to ever take centre stage, but to point beyond ourselves, past ourselves, to help others recognise who Jesus is.

> We can accompany others and end up in unexpected places – but that is where God can be found this story tells us.

> We can speak of the wonder of the person to look for, but the encounter is a matter for God's agenda, not ours. We can have the honour of pointing the way, but the revelation will not be of our design.

> All well and good in theory – but given the nature of our current 'wilderness' experience, how can we reach out to connect with anyone when we need to keep our distance and it's not currently safe to meet in our church buildings?

> This is difficult question that has been gnawing away in the background for me since this pandemic took hold.

> I think that there are two answers.

> The first is what so many of you are doing already – helping others – through the food bank, being good neighbours, keeping in touch too. And this is the personal touch – just like we see in the Gospel story – it's not about priest in robes or grand buildings – our attention is on *people*.

> The second, is what we are doing right now – making use of the wonders of technology to connect.

> The younger generations embraced digital connectivity a long time ago – some of us have been on a very steep learning curve to try and catch up.

> But this is where the future lies – the upcoming generations interact socially quite differently – and these times of lockdown have given us a unique opportunity to discover (as many of the lively churches have done already) the way to connect with people, and to help others glimpse Jesus as God's Son is by making use of technology.

> This has huge potential and could well be a significant new aspect as church communities adapt into a new 'normal'.

> Could the wilderness be a place for us to unexpectedly discover something new and exciting?

Amen