

Sermon for the First Sunday after the Epiphany, January 7, 2018**Solemn Mass****By the Reverend Stephen Gerth***Year B: Isaiah 42:1–9; Psalm 89:20–29; Acts 10:34–38; Mark 1:4–11**

A friend with whom I chat at my gym and his wife are young parents. They go to church. They happen to be Roman Catholic. Last week Epiphany came up. I don't remember exactly how it came up, but I said something about there being shepherds and angels in Luke, but only wise men and a star in Matthew. My friend realized that I was telling him there were two different stories. I think I said something about Mary being a virgin in Matthew and Luke, but the stories are different. I reminded him about the seven-day creation story at the beginning of Genesis, followed immediately by the entirely different story of Adam and Eve.

Before I sat down to reread about today's gospel lesson from Mark, I didn't expect to find something of the same kind of ambiguity in the story of Jesus' baptism. I just had not paid close attention to the textual issue in the lesson involving one Greek letter, an omicron—not omega, the long “o” sound, but the short “o.” It's the English word “t-h-e”: “the” or

“thee.” Its presence, or absence, changes the meaning of the verse.

The editors of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible actually gave their translation of the first verse of today’s gospel lesson a letter grade of “C,” meaning that there is “a considerable degree of doubt” about whether they have made the right choice among evidence available to them.¹

If you include the Greek word for “t-h-e,” you get “John **the** baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”²

But as Duke Divinity School Professor Joel Marcus points out, if you follow the other family of manuscript evidence and omit the short “o,” you get something else entirely: “John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance leading to the forgiveness of sins.”³ In other words, baptism becomes a beginning, not an

¹ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Corrected Ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1975), xxviii.

² Matthew 1:4.

³ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, Anchor Bible 27 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 149.

arrival—a start of a journey, not a narrow path from which one strays at one’s peril.

One important reason I think Dr. Marcus is probably right is that both Matthew and Luke, writing a decade later, clean up this ambiguity,⁴ not to mention the anxiety then current about Jesus submitting to baptism. (Why does a sinless Jesus need to be baptized?)

Another reason I think baptism is the start of new life with God, and not an arrival to a book of rules to follow, is that in Mark no one but the “unclean spirits” know who Jesus is until he dies.⁵ Then a centurion, not a disciple proclaims, “Truly this man was God’s son.”⁶

In Mark, Jesus’ baptism was an intimate, but not gentle Father/Son moment. It marks the beginning of Jesus’ battle with Satan.⁷ When the heavens are “ripped apart”—here Mark uses the Greek word

⁴ Matthew 3:1–2, 6; Luke 3:3.

⁵ Marcus, 164.

⁶ *Translation*, Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, Anchor Bible 27A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 1053.

⁷ Mark 1:12–13.

“σχίζψ,” from which we get our word “schizophrenia,” only Jesus sees the Spirit descend and hears the voice from the heavens declare, “You are my beloved son; in you I have taken delight.”⁸ In Matthew and Luke the heavens aren’t “ripped opened,” they are just opened.

John proclaimed that one was coming who was “mightier.”⁹ Jesus was the one who could and did defeat Satan.¹⁰ In Mark, Jesus is all about, in the words the late German New Testament scholar Ernst Käsemann, “clearing the earth of demons.”¹¹ The work of clearing the earth of demons goes on until the end of time.

Last year, I heard a British cathedral dean speak about the church’s horizon in t Britain. Few of the young children being baptized today in the church will grow up going to church. Across the years of my work in the church, I think that’s true in many parts of the United States as well, including the Northeast. I don’t think there is any spiritually, emotionally, or

⁸ *Translation* Marcus, 158.

⁹ Mark 1:7.

¹⁰ Marcus, 27, 157.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 190.

intellectually honest way to fill the pews of a church without the members of a local congregation walking and growing with Christ in their lives, especially when so many of our relatives and the people we know seem to have no active relationship with a Christian congregation. Not-for-profit organizations do a lot of good work, but apart from God, a human life is less than it was created to be.

On most of the Sundays until Advent 2018, our gospel lessons will be from Mark. One word we will hear over and over again is the word translated “immediately.” This word is used fifty-one times in the New Testament, forty-one of those times by Mark, and for the first time in today’s lesson: “And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove.”¹² The word “immediately” drives the story Mark wants to tell. There’s something he wants us urgently to know about Jesus’ presence in the lives of humankind since his resurrection. We can’t fix other people, but I think we can continue to pray that Christ can use us, as I believe he uses this holy place in which we worship, to help men, women, and children

¹² Mark 1:10.

to be aware of God's presence in their lives and to walk in relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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