

First Sunday after the Epiphany
Genesis 1:1-5, Psalm 29, Mark 1:4-11
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Juanita and I were driving back from the Outer Banks on the Friday after New Year's Day. We had stopped at a Wendy's for coffee. As we were leaving the parking lot, I saw a sign for a store named "Divine Creations" over a small shop in a strip mall nearby. I said jokingly to Juanita, "Do you think they are selling people since we are all God's divine creations?"

Mark's description of the baptism of Jesus is spare. The later gospel writers of Matthew, Luke and John will expand Mark's version and add many more details surrounding this significant event. Mark simply writes that "as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"

In Mark's gospel, prior to his baptism, we know nothing about Jesus except where he is from – Nazareth. We don't know where he was born, who his parents are, or a single mention of his childhood. What we do know is that he gets far more than just a baptism of repentance. He is doused with Holy Spirit and showered with divine approval.

As far as we know, he has done nothing so far to deserve this anointing. He begins his remarkable public ministry only after this exceptional encounter with water and Spirit and celestial voice.

Clearly Jesus is proclaimed a divine creation as I believe we all are at baptism. Let me repeat that. Clearly Jesus is proclaimed a divine creation as I believe we all are at our baptism. In baptism, we are infused or joined with the person of God we call the Holy Spirit. Our human spirit is "married" with God's Spirit. On page 298 of our prayer book, we can read that in baptism the bond established by God with us is "indissoluble." What a peculiar yet most wonderfully graphic word to use for our union with God. The connection in other words is unbreakable. It can't ever be severed.

Like Jesus we need the Holy Spirit and the affirmation that we are God's beloved sons and daughters to begin our own effective ministries. This doesn't mean we will always act like beloved children of our heavenly Father or everything we do will please God. It means that God's posture toward us is always empowerment and encouragement.

I didn't always make my mother proud of me, but she never gave up on me nor withdrew her love from me. How much more perfectly does our divine parent do that for us?

I don't have a problem baptizing infants who haven't heard the first word about Christ or made any intention to follow in the Christian way. I believe that for any of us to do that, we first need help from the Spirit and to hear and know with all certainty that from the very outset, we are God's treasured children.

Parents, godparents and all of us in the church then become essential to nurture the newly baptized. It's up to all of us to make sure that he or she is both loved beyond belief and is instructed to love others in the Spirit.

It is not a bad idea for us, soon after we wake up or leave the house each day, to say our own name followed by "...you are my son or daughter, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Let's all say it to ourselves right now. (David, you are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.)

How did that feel? Do you believe it? God does.

Maybe we should print it out and post it somewhere in our homes where we will see it each morning and perhaps each evening before bedtime.

I am sure that changing the way we feel about ourselves will change the way we think about and act toward others. If we can believe wholeheartedly that we are divine creations, we will begin to see everyone else as divine creations as well.

Mark's version of Jesus' baptism, as I said earlier, is spare but also less refined than later gospels. Mark's telling is more wild. John appears without warning from the wilderness. The river is moving, perhaps even rushing. We're told only in Mark that the heavens are "torn apart" as compared to the softer word "opened" in Matthew and Luke. And right after Jesus' baptism, Mark tells us that the same Spirit that descended from a gaping heaven will drive Jesus into the wilderness for a long period of testing.

In Mark then, the Spirit of God is both gentle as a dove and fierce as a roaring lion let loose from captivity. The God that loves Jesus and us is ready to get down to business. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, and especially during periods of Jewish defeat, occupation or exile, the people wanted a God who would come down and intervene in human affairs. They desired their God to right wrongs and settle accounts with Israel's enemies.

Jesus will do battle with human sin confronting and subsequently threatening the powerful both in Judaism and Rome. As baptized followers of Jesus, filled with the Spirit and enlisted in the ranks of God's beloved, we are to become a little wild, unrestrained and fervent in our Lord's pursuit of justice especially for the browbeaten and exploited. An old priest friend of

mine back in Rhode Island used to dismiss us from church with instructions “to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”

Finally, Epiphany is sometimes referred to as the season of light. It began last Tuesday with wise men following a bright star to the infant Jesus’ cradle. It will end in five weeks with the adult Jesus being transfigured in brilliant radiance on a mountaintop. In Genesis, as we heard, the first thing God did was to create light. In the gospels, Jesus, the new divine creation, will be the light of the world.

Whether we were immersed in a river or sprinkled at a font, let us pray that the Holy Spirit will fill us with light and set us on fire to follow Jesus with a new abandon, a new wildness born of God’s delight in us. AMEN.