

Epiphany 1A
Peace, Seattle
January 7, 2018
Mark 1:4-11

EARTHBOUND JESUS

After a foray into Luke's gospel for Christmas, we're back in the gospel of Mark this morning; and back to noticing how Mark's Good News story of Jesus is enmeshed with earthy things—is tactile, embodied, real.¹

There are reminders of this throughout this morning's text; images of rugged wilderness and river water; of leather belts and camel's hair; of locusts, honey, and sandal ties.

From the get-go Mark puts us on notice that the One whose story he tells does not hover above the ground but has his feet planted on terra firma. Nor will the truth of who he is be conveyed through intellectual arguments or literary persuasion. Instead, Mark gives us the raw story—unfiltered and straight-up—in language as dense and compact and as the desert rocks that line the Jordan River.

So if, for example, in the baptism scene we're privy to today we've envisioned the Spirit's descent upon Jesus as the gentle alighting of a mild-mannered dove—which is how so many artists through the ages have depicted it—Mark invites us to think again!

Mark alone among gospel writers declares that the heavens were RIPPED APART when Jesus rose out of Jordan's murky waters.²

Now I ask you, what kind of avian behavior would be consistent with such a scene? A dove gently descending? More like a FEARLESS, DIVE-BOMBING CROW—fiercely marking its territory and protecting its nest.

If you're not sure you can buy that reading, there are further clues in the verses that immediately follow. Matthew and Luke have Jesus "led" by the Spirit into the wilderness after his baptism. But Mark offers a very different account of what happened.

According to Mark, after his baptism Jesus is ***driven*** by the Spirit into the wilderness—the word is εκβαλλω. Instead of a gentle dove, Mark's language conjures the image of a desert hawk chasing Jesus with talons at the ready.

A rendering such as that fits much more readily a scene where the sky torn asunder, don't you think?

The larger point Mark's conveying here is that earthiness and Spirit go together; THE REALM OF THE SACRED and THE FLESHINESS OF MATTER are as ONE in Jesus.

C. S. Lewis, I'm told, once said that for Christians "spirit" is not lighter than matter, but heavier. Spirit is not detached from reality, it is the real substance of God acting to create, to redeem, and to reconcile all things; and it is always tied to the material world—real water, real bread, real wine.³

We catch a glimpse of this understanding in the opening lines of Genesis – with the RUACH of the Creator—wind, spirit, breath—stirring up whitecaps over primordial waters.

¹ See commentary by Elton Brown in *Feasting on the Word*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 236ff.

² See Thomas Troeger's marvelous hymn, *What Ruler Wades Through Murky Streams?*

³ E. Brown, op. cit.

When we wade in baptismal waters—as our brother Mark G. will today—it's our REAL SELF we bring before God, not some imagined or sanitized version. And it's the whole substance of our lives Christ comes to make his own; he isn't content with just a sliver—he wants the whole enchilada!

I've said it before: THE WATER IN OUR FONT HAS A HISTORY, AND THAT HISTORY MATTERS.

It can be traced back not only to the snow capped mountains that ring the Cedar River watershed, but far beyond in deep time to our solar system's formation, when hydrogen and oxygen molecules first forged within the cauldrons of ancient stars, were ferried to this fledgling planet on the wings of meteors over eons too great to number.

Why does this matter? It matters because when this water over which the Spirit of God brooded in the beginning makes contact with us in the font, it binds us to the God who formed us from clay and follows us wherever we go.

As rivers reshape the landscapes in which they flow, so too the lives we live are shaped and molded by the new identity we receive in these waters. That identity flows into every nook and cranny of our lives—the personal, the social, the economic, the ecological, the political—none is left out.

In baptism God's promise moves IN, WITH, and UNDER this water—infusing it with grace, calling us to new life oriented around our Lord and his way of being in the world.

Brother Martin understood this, understood who was acting in this sacrament, and so, too, did the Celtic saints a thousand years before him.

The baptismal hymn we'll soon be singing is based on St. Patrick's Breastplate Prayer.

Patrick, born in the year 390, was kidnapped at age 16 from his home in Roman Britain by Irish pirates, and brought to Ireland where he was kept as a slave for six years.

During this time the seed of faith, which had been sown in his family, took root within him in a new way. During his long and lonely years of servitude, deprived of the comfort and care he once had known, Patrick found himself turning to with the Lord of heaven and earth.

In his final year of captivity Patrick heard a Voice tell him he would soon be heading home and that his ship was being readied. Heeding the Voice, Patrick fled 200 miles on foot to a port where a waiting ship allowed him to board.

Patrick heeded the call to serve the God who'd led him home, and when later that God sent him back to the country of his captivity as a missionary, he brought a full-bodied gospel with him. Some 1,500 years later, his prayer still stirs body and soul.

I BIND UNTO MYSELF TODAY THE STRONG NAME OF THE TRINITY,
BY INVOCATION OF THE SAME THE THREE IN ONE AND ONE IN THREE.

Pay attention to the WORDS! HEED THE WORDS!

They are like mortar that, bonded to Christ the Cornerstone, holds all things heavenly and earthly in a single piece. Nothing is left out, you see—the whole of Jesus' journey is there in verse two; then, in verse three the whole earthly realm, from sky to sea to earth.

There is but One who can quench our thirst for belonging, meaning, and purpose, says Patrick. One above all others who will companion us our whole life through, and beyond.

He was given the name BELOVED at his own baptism, and wills to share that same name with us.

This Christ is with us wherever we go, says Patrick, before and behind, above and below, around and within; surrounding us with grace and mercy, calling us to be as fully committed to following him as he is to loving us.

Mark Russell G., Christ has called you to wade in Jordan's waters, to be named BELOVED. And you have heeded his invitation. So come, come bind yourself to him in faith as he has bound himself to you in love.

And know that as you do so, we will stand beside you and welcome you as our brother, as fellow heir of God's promises, and as coworker with us in the kingdom of God.

Amen.