

## Weekly Reading – Monday, January 5, 2009

The twelve days of Christmas and Epiphany behind us, this Sunday is "The Baptism of Christ," with the baptism story coming from the Gospel of the Year, Mark. I don't normally comment on the Psalm and won't except to say that I especially love this week's, Psalm 29. "The voice of the Lord shatters the cedars . . . He makes Lebanon skip like a calf and Sirion like a young wild ox."

Genesis 1: 1 - 5

One can see why that Psalm with its emphasis on the mighty and majestic word of God is linked with this reading. Here the Word of God calls forth being and order out of nothingness and chaos. Though short, and in a sense only an excerpt from the larger creation story, this brief text is rich. First, there is the theme of God's initiative. The world is called into being by God. God has the first word (and the last). And creation entails separation. "And God separated the light from the darkness." Chaos is everything stuck together. Order and creation entail differentiation, separation. In families and churches, it is sometimes difficult to separate and differentiate, to be who you are and let others be who they are. Congregations and families where people are "stuck" together, unable to differentiate, make much happy talk but not much progress. And finally, the themes of light and new beginnings certainly go with the new year. "Let there be light!" "And there was evening and there was morning, the first day." (Note: the nature of the biblical day, evening to evening).

Acts 19: 1 - 7

Like the Genesis selection, this epistle lesson is also excerpted from a much larger narrative, the colorful account of Paul's ministry in Ephesus. In this scene, Paul encounters some who have been baptized into John (John the Baptist) but not into Jesus. This operates on several different levels: the historical one surely, but also deeper metaphorical and ecclesiological ones. John's was a baptism of preparation, for repentance. The baptism of Jesus is baptism into a new creation and way of life. The gift of the Holy Spirit, not part of the baptism of preparation, is the power conferred for being about the work of new life. In our own time and churches, there are analogies. Some, many perhaps, were baptized into a cultural Christianity, the established religion of North American culture. But there is deeper level, a different baptism, when faith is owned and people begin a chosen Christian walk. Like the folks Paul ran into, some in our churches have had only a limited and partially efficacious baptism, one that has not included the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Mark 1: 4 - 11

And now Mark's account of the baptism of Jesus. Because some version of the baptism of Christ appears in all four gospels, one can read the others to draw some sense of Mark's particular slant and contribution. Several observations: Mark's account of the baptism is characteristically brief and crisp. No long theological disquisition's (John), nor any fancy dancing with John (Matthew). Second, the voice out of the heavens address Jesus personally rather than the public declaration of, say, Matthew. This, in Mark, is a more personal moment

of confirmation and vocation. Third, part of the Markan brevity is a certain abruptness, even violence. "The heavens torn apart . . ." Again, Psalm 29 with its shattered cedars and whirling livestock is a fit companion. Finally, in line with Genesis 1 and comments on it, the initiative lies with God. God whose voice speaks and whose Spirit descends is the main actor. Baptism is not just a "really special moment for me, or a confirmation of my spirituality." No, it is a God thing, a God intrusion to set a new creation in motion. A good Sunday for preachers to deepen understandings of baptism beyond those associated with infant baptism and to offer the liturgical experience of the renewal of baptism.