

The Baptism of the Lord, Cycle B

Isaiah 55:1-11 and Mark 1:7-11

One summer I was a proof-reader with a pool of fifteen typists. One typist was a divorced mother of a young boy. Her husband had abused her physically and continued to abuse her emotionally as they shared custody of their son. This suffering crescendoed when her ex convinced a judge that this woman abused her son so the judge removed him completely from her care. Her ex said he was taking the boy to a distant address he would not share. She got the news in a phone call at work. She crumpled to the floor, sobbing. From the far end of the room, I watched her fall and saw the other typists keep on typing, as if she was not there. I ran to her and embraced her, until she could stand again.

What was wrong with the other typists? Still today, I am outraged and puzzled by their behavior. I had tried to be a sympathetic friend to the mother throughout the summer. Upon reflection, I realized no one else had. How could a person not see another's pain and help? What else could be more important? Too often, we see what we want to see.

This elective seeing is a problem in our relationship with our fellow human beings and simultaneously in our relationship with God. In Mark's version of Jesus' baptism, no one witnesses the divine aspects of the event but Jesus. "On coming up out of the water, *he* saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him." The voice from heaven speaks directly to Jesus: "*You* are my beloved Son," not "This is my beloved," as in Matthew and Luke. Mark introduces here a theme called the Messianic secret, in which Jesus' identity is hushed up. Jesus is concerned that people follow him, not because he is a miracle-worker, but because they are committed, as he is, to a life of sacrifice and compassion. His commitment is God's commitment, writ large in a human being. Mark's Jesus repeatedly challenges the disciples to take up their cross, not to remain comfortable or focused on their own affairs. This is a harsh jolt for us today as we come off of the warm-fuzzies we have built into Christmas. We have made Christmas about presents, eating and parties – even when we give to the poor. This is a problem only if it is where we stop with our Christmas – or anytime – activities. The gospel calls us to step out of our comfort zones and see the reality of suffering all around us. For Mark's Jesus, the only criterion for action is compassion. We must let ourselves become uncomfortable and do something to help – not just a temporary fix, but a permanent one.

Isaiah 55 makes the same point with vivid imagery. "All you who are thirsty, come to the water! You who have no money, come, receive grain and eat; come without paying and without cost." God is outrageously generous; our worth is not an issue. Besides food and drink, God restores dignity beyond the wildest dreams of the humiliated. We will be like David, "a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander of nations," all because "the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel... has glorified you." Notice the powerful titles of God, yet, God's goal is to provide basic necessities as well as dignity.

The key to open this all up is the nature of our relationship with God: "Heed me and you shall eat well." Some people want a relationship with a Santa figure: if I am reasonably good, God will do what I want. This is the very attitude Mark strives to overcome with his Messianic secret. It is the attitude Isaiah 55 also seeks to dispel by reminding us that God's thoughts are not our thoughts, nor our ways, God's ways. As I wrote last week, God is not an object to be studied or mastered. Some people want God to be a high school principal, a benevolent presence who keeps things running but has little to do with what's really important day-to-day. Yet, here is a God who is profligate in providing, profligate in forgiveness and unstoppable in effectiveness. If our relationship with God is to really work, we cannot control God; we must let God be God. Then we will find that God is One who sees the suffering of human beings and works to alleviate it. What's more, we are called to do the same. Are we willing to see this or will we just keep on typing?

- ❖ If Jesus was coming to your town today, would you go out to see him? What would you want from him?
- ❖ What excites you most about our passage from Isaiah? What troubles you most?