

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Baptism of Our Lord • January 7, 2017

Genesis 1:1-5 • Psalm 29 • Acts 19:1-7 • Mark 1:4-11

The other day, I caught the tail end of a show on the radio called the Moth Radio Hour. The Moth is this organization that puts on events where people get up and tell stories. And the stories can be funny, they can be sad, they can be dramatic, but they have to be true and you can't use notes. And at the end of the radio show, they have this thing where they tell you about upcoming performances and they invite you to share your story at one of these events. And, if you're nervous or you don't know if you have a good story to share, they will assign you a "story coach." And this "story coach" will help you take your story and make it even better. Not by changing anything that happened, but just by changing the way that it's told.

The way you tell a good story, usually, is that it has to have an arc to it. The story has a setup, there's rising action as a conflict is introduced, there's the climax, there's falling action, and then there's resolution. So if you draw out the story, it looks like a pyramid. That's how most storytelling works. That's how Shakespeare works. That's how Agatha Christie works. That's how Herman Melville works. That's, presumably, the way a "story coach" works. They help you develop that rising action and climax. They help your story get that nice pyramid shape to it.

That is not how St. Mark tells a story. In Mark's gospel, the story of Jesus's life isn't a linear story with a nice arc to it. So to help today's gospel reading make sense, let's jump forward a few months. When we get to Easter this year, we're going to hear St. Mark's Easter story. And in Mark's Easter story, a group of women go to the tomb and when they get there, a young man tells them that Jesus is risen and that Jesus is going to Galilee. So, if you want to see the risen Jesus, go back to Galilee. Galilee is where the beginning of Mark's gospel takes place.

So when you get to the end of the story, Mark says that you should go back to the beginning. That if you want to see the new life and resurrection that Jesus is giving us, go back and read the gospel again. So knowing the ending doesn't spoil the story. The irony is that you actually can't understand the power of the story until you know the ending. So if you draw the story out, it's not a pyramid. It's a circle. If you want to see the new life that Jesus is giving us looks like, go back to the beginning.

The gospel reading from today is from the very beginning of St. Mark's gospel. It's the first action that happens in Mark's gospel. It's the story of Jesus's baptism. As a recap, Mark doesn't have a story about Jesus's birth, he has a story about Jesus's baptism. And this was something intentional that Mark did. Mark has some stuff later on about Jesus's family, so he is aware of the tradition. But he chooses to put Jesus's baptism front and center in his gospel. So when St. Mark says that if you want to understand Jesus's resurrection, you need to go back to the beginning, Jesus's baptism is the beginning.

This seems like an inefficient way of telling a story. And it is. No one likes getting to the end of the story and being told that, actually, if you really want to understand the story, you have to go back to the beginning and read the whole thing all over again. But there's something in Mark's way of telling a story with circles that has a resonance with our lives.

A couple of weeks ago, Roy Borgeson's father died. And so we met up at his father's house to talk about arrangements. And so we're sitting down at the dining room table. And the table is covered with pictures of Roy's dad. Just stacks and stacks of pictures. And I didn't know him, so to me all these pictures just look like a mess. But since he knew him, Roy can look at that pile of pictures and see a story. He can take this big messy pile of pictures, and you can put some sense of order down on top of it. And the story has that kind of pyramid shape to it. He was born in the city,

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then he fought in the war, then he went to college, then he got married, had a family, had a business, so on and so on. Right, the story has a clear arc to it. When you look back at the end of someone's life, you can trim away certain things and end up with a pretty clear story of their life.

But we can only do that when you have some distance from life. That kind of pyramid structure is nice for telling stories, but it's not how we actually experience life at all. No one says, "Well, now I'm in the rising action stage of my life, so it'll resolve itself soon." None of our high schoolers are saying, "Well now I'm in the setup stage of my life." No. Because we experience life in cycles. Sometimes we have a cycle of death in our lives and sometimes we have a cycle of resurrection. Sometimes we have a cycle of loss and sometimes we have a cycle of hope. Sometimes we have a cycle of certainty and sometimes we have a cycle of doubt.

And as if that's not confusing enough, all of these cycles are usually going at the same time. We lose someone close to us at the same time we stumble into something really good. Or some blessing comes into our lives right when we were grieving. That's not a story with a clear arc to it. That's a story with a lot more going on. So no wonder it starts to feel disorienting. Like you aren't sure what you should be feeling. Or, on some days, like you don't even know who you are anymore.

And so, no surprise, when we feel disoriented by the cycles of life, we want to have some thing that we come back to. Something that we know we can come back to. That no matter what else happens, this is something I can hold on to. For some of us that thing is a job. For others of us it's a relationship. For some of us it's our wealth. For others of us it's our intellect. But what happens? You get laid off. The relationship falls apart. Stock market takes a dip. One day you realize you're not as sharp as you used to be. And then this anchor in your life, the thing you knew you could always come back to, isn't there anymore. Is there something else that you can come back to?

This is why Mark puts the story of Jesus's baptism right at the start of his gospel. Because according to Mark, the thing that is most fundamentally true about you is the identity that you're given in baptism. That when the world is telling you a million other things about who you, when the world is giving you a bunch of options for new anchors to try out, there is one thing that is always true. Which is that you are a loved and cherished child of God. That the words God says about Jesus are true about you. That you are beloved in God's sight. That God sees you the way God sees Jesus.

See this is a story about Jesus. But it's really a story about you. Because Jesus doesn't need to get baptized. If Jesus is God from God, light from light, true God from true God, then there's nothing for him to gain from being baptized. It actually would have made things a lot easier for the early Christians like Mark if Jesus hadn't been baptized. Because the fact that John baptized Jesus struck a lot of people as bizarre. The baptism of Jesus is one of the few events in the gospels that scholars consider historically reliable. Not because we have any evidence that it happened. But because it's too embarrassing of a story to make up. What is the Son of God doing getting baptized by some guy in camel hair?

Jesus gets baptized so that his story can become yours. So that you know that the words God says about Jesus in his baptism are the same words that God says about you in yours. That the most fundamental thing about you is not your job. Or your marital status. Or your age. Or your race. Or even your creed. The most fundamental thing about you is that you are a child of God. And there's nothing you or anyone else can do to change that.

This is part of Mark's genius. Is that Mark comes up with a story that you can read over and over. That when you get to the end of Mark's gospel and you see that Jesus is risen, and you don't know where to go, Mark says go back to the beginning. When following Jesus gets too difficult and you've given up, Mark says go back to the beginning. When you've been living in the shadow of the

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cross for too long, just go back to the beginning. Mark invites you to go back to the thing that is the most fundamentally true about you. You. As you are. Not who God is calling you to be. Not who you want to be. Not who you think God wants you to be. But you as you are. That is who God calls beloved.

So when you get tired. When you start to doubt. When you get discouraged. When you feel afraid. When you feel like you're not good enough. Take St. Mark's advice. And go back to the beginning.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor