

Unpacking the Love Story

First Sunday in Epiphany—January 10, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Mark 1:9-13

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he 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." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

The NPR radio program, "A Prairie Home Companion," once offered an amusing cultural feature entitled "30-Second Shakespeare". This humorous feature included *Hamlet*, where the prince who had little time to brood and reflect, and *Romeo and Juliet*, which was the very definition of a whirlwind romance. The opening verses of Mark's Gospel remind me of this silly radio sketch, not because there is anything silly about Mark's Gospel, but that the opening verses of that book speak endless volumes with so few words! As Mark begins his book he seems to be in a hurry to "set the table" and get on with his reports of Jesus' ministry. A month ago, during the Youth Service we looked at the first eight verses of this first chapter, and in just these few verses we found much rich teaching about Isaiah, John the Baptist, Elijah, repentance, baptism, the Holy Spirit and the coming Messiah! It was so pleasant that we could take little time to slowly "unpack" these verses, for without pausing to study we miss so much of what is being presented. Now we come to the following five introductory verses and they are just as rich and full, and just as much in need of unpacking. As was said a month ago, Mark presents Jesus as a mystery for our discovery, and he leaves us many clues in the decoding of this mystery. I suppose that we should also remember that in ancient times few could read, and even fewer had a copy of the Gospel to read. We are accustomed to books written for easy reading and ready comprehension, but in those days, listeners might memorize a few verses at a time and then spend days and weeks meditating upon the truths they taught. Like those ancient listeners, let us take some time and a close look at these few and precious verses. The events described are familiar to most of us, but what I want us to focus upon is the central verse which is God's pronouncement from heaven. *And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."* Let us see what these words of love have to tell us.

A voice from heaven, obviously the voice of God the Father, spoke at Jesus' baptism. Why this pronouncement, and what exactly did it mean? Apparently, the Father loves the Son and wanted it to be known! This should not be too difficult for us to grasp. Parents love their children and are glad to say so. Parents love us no matter what. There is the old expression of "a face only a mother could love," and crude though this remark may be, it speaks of a parent's enduring and unconditional affection for their own. If we shift our attention to John's Gospel, we find Jesus on several occasions speaking of the Son loving the Father and the Father loving the Son. These verses usually strike us as odd and we are quick to move on to other teachings, but there is a profound truth at hand which deserves more of our attention. God in heaven is utterly delighted in Jesus Christ His Son! A few weeks back Kay and I were at my son's church for a Christmas pageant, and there I saw a most amazing angel with a lesson for all of us. The shepherds were out in their fields tending their sheep when a whole host of angels appeared to them telling of the birth of Jesus. These angels are commonly portrayed as being solemn in their important work of proclaiming the royal birth, but this angel had an even deeper understanding of the message and of the Father's love. This one little angel was jumping up and down with excitement as the glad message was shared! She was expressing a truth which receives too little attention. God was utterly delighted at the coming of His Son, for He dearly loves this Son.

God loves Jesus because Jesus is the Son, but there is more. God was delighting in Jesus' glad obedience. Now, thirty years after the birth, the time for Jesus' ministry had come. We do not know just how Jesus came to know that his time had come, but when God called, Jesus answered without hesitation. He traveled to the Jordan River to begin his ministry by being baptized by John. This was not the kind of journey one made in an afternoon, but required days of travel. Obediently he came to John, and obediently he submitted to baptism, for this was the Father's will and plan. Of course, it seems so very odd for Jesus to receive baptism as John was baptizing people for the forgiveness of sin, and Jesus had no sin. But the Son had come to stand in the sinner's place, and to take his place by our side as he began his earthly ministry. This was a deeply humbling thing for a divine Son to undergo, but such was the Father's plan, and Jesus followed gladly. Harder still, Jesus was about to spend forty days and nights in the wilderness to experience temptation, hunger and many dangers. Such was the Son's obedience.

More than delighting in the Son's obedience, God delighted in Jesus' deep desire to give His Father glory. Our children make us so proud! What a thrill to hear a boss or co-worker tell of our son or daughter's reliability and dedication to their work and fellow workers, or to hear any kind words spoken of our children. Though we seldom speak of the matter in this way, it gives us parents glory! God the Father truly loves the Son, because Jesus is God's Son, because of Jesus' obedience, and because Jesus so gladly sought to glorify the Father.

The Father freely proclaimed love for the Son, and the Son spoke very similarly in the return direction! Jesus made clear His love for God as he lived a glad obedience. In all that Jesus did He sought to please God and give God *glory*. I am now speaking of words Jesus spoke apart from this passage in Mark, but this is a point worth our consideration at this time. The language of glory is found primarily in John's Gospel, but note how throughout the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) Jesus spoke of his Father in heaven, with affection and delight. This is a lesson for all of us as we speak of *Our* Father in heaven. Among well intentioned Christian people I will hear many mentions of showing proper *respect* for God, or even honor. Respect and honor are wonderful things, but how much better it is to want to give God our delight and glory just as our Lord did. Jesus' life and teaching flowed with a deep affection for God, and we should seek to do the same in our lives.

Jesus spoke affectionately of the Father, and also delighted in God's plan. While on this earth Jesus walked by faith, much as we do. In faith Jesus came to be baptized, and God affirmed Jesus' faith with His glad words at that baptism. Jesus was reminded and encouraged that He was on the right path, and gladly and with fresh energy he could then press on to the next stage of the journey. A life of faith is like that. We take a step of faith, find that faith affirmed, then gladly take the next step. I believed that God had called me to ministry and so I pursued the necessary training. I then made it through divinity school even though there were times when it seemed impossible. Upon graduation I faced a parish with little experience, but with the conviction that if God got me through school, then God could teach me to lead a congregation. And so it goes. We learn that we can handle married life, so we have a child. And having found blessing in this endeavor we step on to new challenges of faith. The obedience which lay immediately ahead for Jesus was nothing short of frightening. Here was a dangerous obedience. *And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.* God sustained, and yes, it was a very painful experience for our Lord. Such is the walk of faith.

The Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father. The passage makes this lesson clear, but one might ask, and ask in all respect, what does this really mean to us? This is a good question, and the answer to this question is wonderful! Mark 1:9-14 may first read like a lesson on the Trinity, and it is. Jesus' baptism has been called a Trinitarian moment in the Scriptures as it is one of the relatively few times where we find the Father, Son and Holy Spirit all mentioned together. There is much to learn of the Trinity here, and when we come to such verses, we are quick to study them like detached scholars. We look at the Trinity in a rather mechanical and theological way, and if we gain a new insight into this central Christian doctrine, we may try to express it with a chart or a diagram. There is a time for theological lessons, charts and doctrine, but if this is all we consider in examining the Trinity we are badly missing the central matter before us. The Bible presents God as a loving and alive, divine

Family. This is a truth we too easily miss when we treat the study of the Trinity as a mechanical challenge. ("How can Three be One?")

Here we find God revealed as Trinity, and we find that this divine Family wants *us* to join in the fellowship and joy of that family! Jesus, God's very Son, is standing with us in baptism and desires that we walk with Him! He is even willing to go to the Cross for us to die the sinner's death for us. Here we find the Spirit of God breaking through to give life to a dying world. *And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.* The Spirit descended upon Christ, and in time would fill the empty lives of all who seek divine life. Over all of this we find a heavenly Father who delights to bring wayward children back into the family. This is the meaning of Trinity, and it is no mere dull doctrine.

And so Mark invites us, to walk with the Father, to be filled with the Spirit, and to stay near the Savior. Mark's Gospel begins and the mystery unfolds. It is a love story involving a divine Family and a love which is reaching out to us, and as Mark makes clear in these beginning verses of his book, we had better play some very close attention to this Jesus!