

“Movement”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Mark 1:1-20

January 12, 2020 - Baptism of the Lord

This is our fourth year following the Narrative Lectionary prescription of Sunday readings here at Edgewood. The pattern is that we begin with the Torah in September, work through Israel's history through the fall, encounter the prophets in the season of Advent, and then work our way through a Gospel from January through Easter before turning to the writings of the early Church.

And so we turn to the Gospel of Mark. Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start. Listen for the voice of God from the Gospel according to Mark:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,

who will prepare your way;

the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight.’”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

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 immediately the Spirit 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.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat

mending the nets. And immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

At about 6:30 a.m. on Saturday, March 18, 1967, the First Officer of the oil supertanker the *Torrey Canyon* realized that the ship was too far to the east.

Torrey Canyon was on its way to Wales from Kuwait with 119,000 tons of crude oil. Twenty-two miles off the southwest coast of England lie the Scilly Islands. Between the islands and the Cornish coast is a reef called Seven Stones. By 1967, large ships like the 947-foot-long *Torrey Canyon* knew that the best path was to go outside the Scilly Islands. The First Officer saw the islands on the radar, but they were not where they were supposed to be. He changed the course and woke the captain.

Captain Rugiati reversed the order, though. He wanted to try to make it to Wales within a tide window that would allow the *Torrey Canyon* to come into port instead of waiting out in deep waters for days. He would try for the shorter route, threading the 7-mile needle between the islands and the reef.

Everything was calm for about an hour. Captain Rugiati turned the ship to the left, seeking to head down the middle of the channel. Even for a big supertanker, seven miles was plenty of room. But the wind and current that had pushed the *Torrey Canyon* so far east were still working on it. And then there were fishing buoys and boats they were trying to avoid. And then the Third Officer messed up a fix — a position reading — and suddenly Captain Rugiati realized he had bad info and didn't know where he was.

Another fix was taken and the radar was checked and they were less than three miles from the first of the Seven Stones. The stones were straight ahead, and there were those fishing vessels to the left! But to the right there was fifteen miles of deep water between the stones and the coast. Turn right, Captain!

He turned left. This narrower path had been his plan. He couldn't see another option. He ordered the Third Officer to go hard to the left. There was still time. The Officer turned the wheel, but nothing happened. Captain Rugiati checked fuses. Then he wondered if there was an issue with the fuel pump and called the engine room. But in his haste, he misdialed. "Are you ready for breakfast, Captain?" the dining room asked. It was then that Captain Rugiati saw that the steering system had not been switched to "manual." He rushed to the wheel, pulled the lever, and wrenched the wheel hard to the left. But it was too late.¹

I don't think anyone here has caused an environmental disaster by spilling over 100,000 tons of oil into the ocean. And yet, we know this situation. Experts call it "plan continuation bias." We have momentum. We're going in one direction. Straying from it is unthinkable. We get tunnel vision. Seeing another way would take a moment of extreme clarity, and that is so rarely offered to us.

¹ <http://timharford.com/2019/02/lessons-from-the-wreck-of-the-torrey-canyon/> and Tim Harford's excellent podcast, "Cautionary Tales"

Enter John, in the wilderness, baptizing and telling people to open their minds, to turn around and take a different path. He creates quite the movement, with people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem asking to have their understanding expanded, a new direction shown to them. They've been looking for an off-ramp from the course set before them, it seems. Whatever they were doing wasn't working.

Mark gives us a lot of movement in his Gospel. The phrase "and immediately" gets used forty times in Mark's sixteen chapters, and we hear it three times in these first twenty verses. Mark's Jesus is a bounding lion, switching locations rapidly, always firmly in control. He's being baptized. Then he's in the wilderness. Then he's in Galilee. Then he's at the shore, picking new recruits. He's like that "Old Spice" ad from a few Super Bowls ago: "You're on a boat...I'm on a horse." The agile Jesus of Mark doesn't make wrong turns. He's got no time to explain things to you. You've got to keep up with him. You can't. The disciples can't. You can only follow.

Jesus pops into this Gospel without a birth narrative, without any background at all. He shows up on the scene of John's movement and gets baptized and I always remember the Spirit descending and the voice saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." But the detail of the heavens being "torn apart" catches me every time.

We spend so much time chasing the holy, looking to tap into the movement of God's Spirit, yearning to find thin places where earth feels filled with the divine presence, squinting for glimpses of sacredness. Here we find the divine reaching back, moving through time and atmosphere to deliver a blessing.

After his wilderness sojourn, Jesus is off to Galilee to tell people "It's go time. Holiness is close. Change your course." And then things get real at the lakeshore. First Simon and Andrew, then James and John, are invited to abandon their plans for fisherman's lives and do something wholly new — to fish for people.

Are we willing to see another way when it is offered to us?

It is so easy to be reassured by the wisdom of our own plan, to simply go with the way it's been done, to get stuck in tunnel vision. I go to a lot of meetings with Presbyterians. Many of us could get a merit badge in threading the needle in defiance of good and new ideas.

I'm reminded of a conversation I had with Rick Ufford-Chase, who was the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church (USA) from 2004-2006. Rick's a serious peace activist and he told me that when people tell him that peacemaking can't actually make a difference in the world, he tells them that he'd like to try peacemaking with a \$2 trillion budget. Instead, the tried and true course of blowing stuff and people up continues to prevail. We can see no other option.

Except that, of course, we do. We remember the baptism of Jesus and the water in the font is for all of us. When a child or adult is baptized in this community, we make promises to guide that person in a new path. We promise to teach them to live as part of the Jesus movement. We promise to show them a way that is not easy, that requires courage and patience and occasionally speaking up to someone who outranks

you, that demands justice above protocol and love above convenience.

To follow the one that divinity tears the sky apart for, you might spend more time in deep water than you planned, you might need to attune your eyes and ears to notice what is going unnoticed, you might need to be willing to move in ways that feel uncomfortable.

In the waters where God meets us, there is clarity, there is grace, there is a way forward.

And there is a voice declaring that you are beloved.

Amen.