

January 11, 2015

First Sunday after Epiphany

"Mission: Possible"

By Pastor Mary Anne Biggs

Genesis 1:1-5 ~ Mark 1:4-11

I haven't understood television programming for a long time. It all started years ago when there was reality show ... that if you won ... the big prize was being named Paris Hilton's best friend. I can't imagine how bad second prize must have been! But I have to admit that I do scan the channels sometimes looking for what I call nostalgia TV. I especially like to do this at my sister's house because she gets a station called MeTV that is a goldmine of my old favorites ... St. Elegious, Hill Street Blues, Mary Tyler Moore and The Bob Newhart Show. Almost every day they show Mission: Impossible ... not the movies, but the television show. Many of you may remember it...every week this guy would open his shaving cabinet or a box of cereal, and there would be a little tape recorder saying, "Good morning, Mr. Phelps. Your mission, should you choose to accept it..." It would go on to detail a mission for his team to go to some foreign country, discredit its leader, lead a bloodless coup thus preventing a war so that countless innocent would not be killed and maimed. Boy, couldn't we use those guys today?! Well, this morning I'm here to remind you that God has given you a mission. And it began the day you were baptized.

The gospel accounts agree that Jesus was baptized. The heavens were ripped open, God's spirit descended, and as he came up out of the water, Jesus heard the voice of God: *"You are my Son, my Beloved; with you I am well pleased"* (Mark 1:11). God was quoting scriptures that Jesus knew ... the coronation language from Psalm 2 and the suffering servant image from Isaiah 42. Taken together these texts guided Jesus towards his unique messianic destiny and mission. In essence, they said, "You are the Messiah ... suffering servant is the kind of Messiah you will be." What the voice of God adds to these scriptures at Jesus' baptism is the word "beloved."

It was an epiphany because, Mark says, that the heavens were ripped open and the Spirit of God descended. For the Hebrews, the heavens ripping open was a fearful thing. In Genesis 1 God created a firmament separating heaven from earth ... God from humanity. In Genesis 6, the heavens were ripped open and the earth was flooded ... creation barely saved by the grace of God with an ark which carried Noah and company safely through the waters. In Genesis 9, when proud humans tried to build a tower breaching the heavens, God confounded them. Breaching the separation of heaven and earth was a dangerous thing. But in Jesus' baptism, God ripped open the heavens and came down to us. Mark used the same verb to say that the veil of the temple separating the people from God's presence was ripped in two when Jesus died on the cross. From baptism to cross, Christ breaches the separation between God and humanity.

Baptism was the beginning of Jesus' mission for God ... his answer to God's call to give himself for the world. And where did he begin ...with death and resurrection. Buried with him in the Jordan ... his former life in the quiet carpenter shop at Nazareth ... normal human dreams and

desires ... perhaps to marry, have a family, grow old and watch what his children might become. Buried with him in the Jordan ... the freedom to abuse his power ... to demand submission from the world ... to avoid the way of the cross. This is where the cross was decided ... where Jesus laid down this life in service to God. But he rose from the water to a new life ... a new mission ... his destiny before God.

Marcus Borg says that Jesus had a conversion ... not in the sense of changing religions or being lost and saved ... but in William James' sense of a "process, whether sudden or gradual, whereby religious impulses and energies become central to one's life." The innocence of childhood long past ... the adolescent search for self completed ... the young adult career begun ... Jesus turned to the ultimate quest ... "Who am I and what does my life mean?" He answered: "I am a child of God, and I am about God's work." And God approved. In other words, Jesus' baptism was his wholehearted immersion into his messianic mission ... the acceptance of his vocation.

What does baptism mean for us ... repentance and forgiveness ... cleansing and renewal? A remembrance of the death and resurrection of Jesus and the prospect of our own ... for this is where we also begin and end ... dying and rising with Christ. If we are baptized as adults, this is also where we come to put childhood and adolescence behind us ... when we get serious about who we are and what our life will mean. Here we willfully choose and accept the destiny that God gives us ... to be God's children and about God's work in the world. If we are baptized as infants or young children, this is where our parents and sponsors and the members of this church promise, with the help of God, to love, support and care for us. The promises that we make are astounding. We promise to help these children to renounce the powers of evil and to receive the freedom of new life in Christ. We promise to teach them that they may be led to profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. We promise to show them how to follow in the way of our Savior, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ. We promise to grow with these children in the Christian faith, to help them to be a faithful member of the church of Jesus Christ, by celebrating Christ's presence, by furthering Christ's mission in all the world, and by offering the nurture of the Christian church so that they may affirm their baptism. Pretty heady stuff isn't? Do we really mean to keep these promises or do we have our fingers crossed behind our backs? Are they just words or are they vows?

For us, as for Christ, the baptismal font is a symbol of sacrifice, where we lay down our lives for God and take them up again to live according to God's purpose. We are somebody in the world. We are here on a mission. It is not a "Mission: Impossible" because Scripture tells us that "nothing will be impossible with God." (Luke 1:37). We are the baptized! What was true for Jesus is true for us!

It is true because Jesus' baptism is not just a sign of his unique divine identity ... it is also a word about his common human identity. It is about our mission and God's presence with us ... God's love for each of us. And if you are one of the baptized ... every time you witness another baptism ... every time you walk into the sanctuary and see the baptismal font ... you renew your baptism. This is who you are ... where you began ... where you are headed ... what you are doing in the world. You are the baptized!

In most of life's endeavors we get affirmation only as a reward ... after we have worked hard to succeed. But Jesus receives God's blessing right from the start, and everything he does comes

out of a heart beloved by God. We, too, have God's blessing right from the start. I baptize people with the traditional Trinitarian formula derived from Matthew's gospel: *"On this profession of faith, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."* Those are important words, but the words I should also be using are, *"You are God's beloved child; God is well pleased with you."*

As we are named at birth, so we are given a new name when we are born again in the waters of baptism. God names us "child of God." God names us "Beloved." For this is our destiny and our mission from the day we are baptized ... to be daughters and sons of God ... to know we are God's beloved ...and to serve the world by carrying God's love into everything we do.

Martin Luther King called his ideal vision of the church "the beloved community." The church is the place where people experience the unconditional love of God regardless of their race or gender or orientation or economic class or past mistakes or present condition. The church is the place where the great commission (Matt 28:19-20) is accomplished through the great commandment, that we love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves (Matt 22:37-39). What did the beloved Son of God say to his disciples? *"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another"* (John 13:34-35). The love of God is our destiny and mission. The love of God is our beginning and our end. The love of God is what makes us right from the start.

Was there ever a time when the world needed God's beloved community more? There is surely not enough love in the world today. There is too much fear and hatred. Love is risky. Love is costly. People are hard to love ... it's hard to love the stranger ... to love the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame ... it's so very hard to love our enemies. It's hard to love strangers and sometimes it's hard to love the people we know really well. And it's hard to believe that the people who know us really well will love us. Sometimes it does seem that God has given us an impossible mission.

In this day of terror and violence and deep division, we are not strong enough by ourselves to love the world the way God so loved the world. The mission is only possible if the Spirit of God descends upon us and dwells within us and we remember that we are God's beloved children ... and so are they! That is what happens when we are baptized ... and that is what happens when we remember our baptism. May we pray?

Holy God, untamed by the names we give you,
You have named us. Today let us remember who we are:
Children of God, Beloved, called to love in Jesus' name. Amen.