

Promises Made... January 11, 2009, Baptism of the Lord
Mark 1:4-11

My favorite scene in the movie Finding Nemo takes place at the very end, after the credits begin to roll. The heart of the story is already over. After a harrowing journey across the sea, Marlin, the father clownfish, has been reunited with his son, Nemo, who had been taken from his home on the Great Barrier Reef and ended up in the fish tank of a Sydney dentist. And they all lived happily ever after. The end. Well, not quite. For, although the main story has ended, we soon discover that another story has just begun.

You see, the fish who had helped Nemo escape from the tank had managed to free themselves, too. While their tank is being cleaned, they manage to roll the plastic bags they're in along the counter, out the window, across the street, and into Sydney Harbor. When the last one finally reaches the water, there is a collective cheer and sigh of relief. And then the reality of their situation dawns upon them. Bobbing in the ocean, still encased in a thin layer of plastic, Bloat, the puffer fish, breaks the silence with the words: "Now what?"

Now what? That is the question on my mind today. The great drama of Advent is over. After their own harrowing journey to the manger, Mary and Joseph have welcomed their son into the world. The heavenly host has sung, the shepherds have gone to Bethlehem and seen their Messiah in the manger. Simeon and Anna have rejoiced that they lived to see the light of the Gentiles and the glory of Israel revealed in the temple. The Magi have followed the star, paid their respects, left their gifts, and gone home by another way.

That's good stuff. Great stuff, actually. In fact, it doesn't get

much better than that. And therein lies the challenge of every preacher in Christendom on this second Sunday in January. Now what? What good news is there left to be said today, on the other side of Christmas?

And it's not just we preachers who are in a pickle. For it's at about this time every year that we all realize something; something that the holidays let us tuck under the tree for a few weeks. We realize that, for all of the Christmas fuss, we're still waiting. After all of the carols have been sung, all of the presents given, all of the glorious promises read, for all of the magic of the season, we're still waiting for Jesus... still waiting for his kingdom to come...still waiting for his Church to thrive...still waiting for his will to be done in the parched landscape of our souls. Here, on the other side of Christmas, we find ourselves living in the same old world with the same old people and struggling with the same old demons as always. On the other side of Christmas we can't help but wonder: "Now what?"

Even our liturgical calendar seems to be struggling today. On the planning calendar in my office, it shows that the liturgical color for the day is still white, the color of Christmastide. And yet, this Sunday is also the day that we return to what is called "Ordinary Time (or Kindomtide)" It's further evidence that we are living, in the words of professor Jasper Keith, "on the threshold between the numinous (or mystical) and the mundane." We are living somewhere between the holidays and the every days. And if it seems that we have been here before, we have-- just five weeks ago.

Today's Gospel reading actually begins in the very same place of the very same Gospel as the one assigned for the Second Sunday of Advent. Only five weeks later and we find ourselves right back where we started. It's as if Christmas never came after all. And if we're honest with ourselves, that feels about right, right now.

Before we know it, we're back in the wilderness. Before we know it, we're back in line waiting for what John offers: forgiveness for our sins and a thorough dunking in the grace of God. And, yet, even as we're going under again, we know that sooner or later we'll be right back here holding our breath for a miracle. After all, that is the way it has always been. That is the way we have always been. Why should we expect it to be any different this time around?

And then Mark gives us our answer. For although these two readings are similar, they are not the same. On the Second Sunday of Advent, the Gospel reading ends with John's baptism. It ends with us shivering in the wilderness with nothing between us and God except John and the Jordan. But here, on the other side of Christmas, Mark keeps going. Just when it seems that the story is over and the credits are beginning to roll, just when it seems that we will never get out of the wilderness, never get away from John, never get away from ourselves, Mark continues:

"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.'"

"Now what?" we ask. "Now Jesus!" says Mark.

A mother was at home with her two young daughters one lazy afternoon. Everything seemed to be just fine until the mother realized something strange. The house was quiet. And as every parent knows, a quiet house in the daytime can only mean one thing: the kids are up to no good.

Quietly walking into each of the girls' rooms and not finding them

there, she began to get worried. Then she heard it: the sound of whispering followed by the flushing of a toilet. Following the sound, she soon realized where it was coming from. It was coming from her bathroom. Whispers, flush. Whispers, flush. Whispers, flush. Poking her head into the room, she was able to see both of her daughters standing over the toilet. Whispers, flush. One of them was holding a dripping Barbie doll by the ankles and the other one had her finger on the handle. Whispers, flush. Wanting to hear what her daughter was saying, she slipped quietly into the room. Whispers, flush. And this is what she heard: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and in the hole you go." Flush.

... a true story. But you already knew that, didn't you? You knew this was a true story because it's your story, it's my story, it's our story. We know it's true because we know what it feels like to have life grab us by the ankles and dangle us over the waters of chaos. And we know that this happens in spite of our faith. We even know that, at times, it happens precisely because of our faith.

Don't believe me? All you have to do is look at Jesus. What was the first thing that happened to him after his baptism? The Spirit whisked him away to be tempted by the devil. In the hole you go!

That's why I think Mark tells the story of Jesus' baptism the way he does--as an intimate encounter between himself and God and not a spectacle for everyone to see and hear. I think Mark tells it this way because he wants us to know what it meant to Jesus before we try to figure out what it means for us.

So what did it mean for Jesus? It didn't mean that the Father would keep him out of trouble. He found that out even before he had a chance to dry off! It didn't even mean that things would

work out just the way he had planned. No, it seems to me that what Jesus' baptism meant to him was that when he found himself in trouble, he wouldn't find himself alone. It meant that even when things didn't go his way, he would still have the Father's blessing and the Spirit's company.

And isn't that what his baptism means to us too? Unlike John's baptism, Jesus' baptism means that we are not alone in the wilderness. It means that God's love for us doesn't depend upon us. It means that God's grace doesn't wash off. The baptism of Jesus means that whenever we find ourselves in a hole, we can be sure that in the hole he goes.

Whenever Martin Luther found himself ready to give up, whenever worry for his own life and the life of the Church he loved overwhelmed him, it is said that he would touch his forehead and say to himself: "Remember Martin, you have been baptized." Here on the other side of Christmas, that sounds like good advice. That sounds like good news.

As we cross this threshold between the numinous and the mundane, the holidays and the every days, the world we hope for and the world we live in, let us also touch our foreheads and remember that we have been baptized. And on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, let us also remember that Jesus was baptized too. He was baptized with us. He was baptized for us. And may the comfort that it gave him through all of his trials give us even greater comfort through ours, those baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and in the hole he goes. Now what? Now let us pray...

Gracious God, we thank you for this story on the other side of Christmas. We thank you for the Spirit's landing and your blessing upon Jesus at his baptism. We thank you for the same in ours. And we thank you for giving us Jesus, the baptized Savior, who shows us that whatever hole we may find ourselves in, in the hole he goes. Help us to remember that we have been baptized. Help us to remember that your grace doesn't wash off. Amen.

Acknowledgements:

The Rev. Tim Boggess, freely adapted