

## WHAT NEXT (Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:4-11)

I'm sure none of you needs a reminder that Christmas is over. The tree's been taken down, the ornaments have been stored away, the cookies are just about gone, toys are already starting to break.

It seems like ages ago, but it's just two weeks since we were celebrating the great Feast of the Incarnation, one of the two high points on the church calendar. There was wonderful music, candlelight services, decorations all around the sanctuary – all those lovely things we typically associate with Christmas. It is a beautiful time. But despite the beauty of Christmas, deep down we know that reality was a bit different. A birth in a stable far away from home must have been a grim, miserable experience. But we insist on cleaning it up, romanticizing it, turning it into something charming and sentimental.

We've come a long way in those two short weeks. Today we've moved from the little town of Bethlehem to the harsh Judean wilderness. The shepherds have gone back to their flocks and the magi have returned to their homes in the east. And in their place we have that weird, outlandish prophet John the Baptist who doesn't bring a message of "peace on earth, goodwill to all" but who's warning us to repent if we know what's good for us and inviting us to join him in the muddy waters of the Jordan River.

If there's something transcendent or even ethereal about the story of Jesus' birth, today's story about his baptism is entirely down to earth – grounded in familiar, grubby everyday reality. It's not a story that lends itself to being romanticized. John the Baptist simply doesn't clean up well.

And I'm not about to try because we need a story like this to remind us that there's no need to try to make things "sacred" by taking them out of the "earthly" realm and assigning them to some special spiritual domain. The fact that we try to do that with Christmas is especially ironic because if the doctrine of the Incarnation tells us anything, it tells us that there is no clear distinction between sacred and profane, between holy and mundane, between spiritual and earthly. It tells us that God didn't remain above the earthly fray but came down to be part of it, to share our common human lot here on earth.

The Psalmist declares that "[t]he heavens are telling the glory of God" (Ps 19:1). And no doubt about it, there is something awe-inspiring about gazing at the sky on a clear night if you can get away from light pollution. There's something awe-inspiring about looking at those amazing photographs taken with the Hubble space telescope. There's something awe-inspiring about contemplating the vastness of space. But the glory of God isn't light years away. The glory of God is in ordinary things we can reach out and touch, in things we can taste or smell or hear. The glory of God is in all those ordinary things that whisper of the holy – and that can be anything.

The ancient Israelites understood that no one can look at God face to face. To shield humans from the unapproachable light of God's glory, God

always remains hidden, veiled by a mask. So even though we can't see God face to face, we can encounter God in all the things God has created. That's the essence of a sacrament: something of this world that gives us a glimpse of what God is like – a little bread, a little juice, a little water.

There's a story about a man who came to study under Rabbi Shneur Zalman, who founded a branch of Hasidic Judaism. Rabbi Zalman was the most learned rabbi in all of Russia and this would-be student had come from many miles away. When the people of the village learned why this visitor had made the long journey, they asked with pride if he first wanted to hear their great rabbi read Talmud or hear him pray. Neither, he said. He only wanted to watch the rabbi cut bread or tie his shoes. The villagers were stunned. Why come so far to see something so ordinary? But the man simply watched the rabbi sitting absently in thought in the warmth of the afternoon sun. And then he went away enlightened. Watching the rabbi just sitting there in the sun had shown him something of God.

In just a few minutes we're going to try a new hymn. The last line of each verse pretty well sums up what I'm saying: "God surprises earth with heaven, coming here on Christmas Day." Jesus was a surprise. Jesus wasn't at all what we expected. Jesus is another example of the way our experience of God doesn't match our expectations for God. The God we actually get isn't the God we were looking for or even wanted.

We are in the season of Epiphany, which is almost an afterthought once Christmas has come and gone. But Epiphany really gives meaning to Christmas. Christmas says God was revealed to the world in the birth of Jesus. Epiphany says God is revealed to the world in the life of Jesus. Christmas is over. The Son of God is now present among us. What next?

Christmas is a spiritual high. Even people who only darken the door of the church twice a year know that. They come here looking for something special. But they won't be back until Easter because they know the spiritual high doesn't last. It's fleeting. It's short-lived. We're back to the cold, dark, ordinary days of January.

We know that, but we're here anyway. We've come down from the mountaintop, as it were, to resume life down in the valley.

And who do we meet there but John the Baptist? John the Baptist, who expected the Messiah, who had waited for the Messiah, who was hoping for the Messiah. But then Jesus shows up and wades into the water and stoops down and takes on solidarity with sinners. And to be honest, that wasn't exactly how John had imagined it. That wasn't what he expected. "What are you, the Son of God, doing asking me to baptize you?"

It's a bit of a comedown after all the euphoria of Christmas with angels and mysterious magi and a miraculous birth to begin the New Year with God knee-deep in the muddy Jordan River with a wild character like John the Baptist.

But that's one of the great aspects of our faith – that it's not just a faith for the mountaintops but also for the valleys. Most of us don't live in a world of perpetual spiritual bliss. We live down in a valley where there's work to be done, meals to be prepared, laundry to be folded, sick kids to be nursed, aging parents

to be worried about, all sorts of troubling realities to be confronted. And here's the good news: that's exactly where God meets us.

God meets us in our baptism. God commissions us to be about God's work. All of our baptisms take their meaning from Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River.

The spiritual highs are great. We'll take all of them we can get, and then some. But what we really want is a faith that, once the spiritual high has past, can answer the question, "What next?"

A Bible study group was discussing a deep theological question. But then one woman spoke up. "Well, most of this is beyond my comprehension. I'm a rather simple disciple. I don't know a lot of theology. I don't understand a lot of the Bible. So I just try to be as faithful a follower of Jesus as I can be in my own little way. And that seems to be enough for Jesus." As someone who does know a bit of theology and something about the Bible, I think she understands the Christian faith pretty well.