

## Baptism of Our Lord B (1/7/2018)

Genesis 1:1-5

Psalm 29

Acts 19:1-7

**Mark 1:4-11**

*God acts in unexpected places. That's the case with Jesus' baptism in the wilderness. On the fringe of society, God ushers in God's reign through "a veritable outpouring of God's rushing, creative power."<sup>1</sup> It's an epiphany, a breaking-in of God's life-giving purpose, like each of our own baptisms. By water and the word, God sweeps us up into grace, freeing us from death, joining us to Christ in newness of life, and anointing us to "bear God's creative and redeeming word to all the world."*

The Saint Lawrence Seaway extends 2,340 miles from the Atlantic Ocean to the head of the Great Lakes. Through an elaborate system of channels and locks, the Seaway allows large commercial ships to travel from the seaboard to destinations throughout the Great Lakes region. Since its completion in 1959, the Saint Lawrence has accommodated the movement of over two and a half billion tons of cargo estimated at a value of 375 billion dollars.<sup>2</sup> It's a feat of engineering, a demonstration of the human power to shape the world to our interests. Of course, that power carries a cost. The Seaway's construction and decades of traffic have done irreversible damage to the region's ecology.

Nevertheless, the Saint Lawrence survives as a place of life and vitality. A journalist once traveled parts of the Seaway by kayak, documenting his experience for an NPR piece. Making his way around an island in the river one day, he came across "a delicate little marsh filled with birds." There he observed a red-wing black-

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen L. Cook:

[http://members.newproclamation.com/commentary.php?d8m=1&d8d=8&d8y=2012&atom\\_id=25905](http://members.newproclamation.com/commentary.php?d8m=1&d8d=8&d8y=2012&atom_id=25905)

<sup>2</sup> <http://greatlakes-seaway.org/en/seaway/facts/index.html>.

bird whose markings were “just the reddest red you can imagine.” A “mother osprey... [watched] over her chicks and little osprey heads [poked] up out of the nest....” A little later, “an entire flotilla of baby Canada geese [fumbled] right by [his] boat--so close [he] could pluck them out of the water.” In light of this experience, the journalist reflected:

Because we use these big rivers as highways and industrial sites, it’s easy to start thinking of them like that. All the policy debates and the talk about plumbing and engineering and commerce can sort of eclipse the fact that the St. Lawrence is still alive and powerful--and at least in places remarkably wild.<sup>3</sup>

In a little marsh on the Saint Lawrence Seaway, the Spirit of God still sweeps over the face of the waters,<sup>4</sup> creating and sustaining life amid circumstances that would otherwise discourage it. **This is an epiphany, a breaking-in of God’s life-giving purpose, revealing a power that has been active since the advent of the universe.** But, this epiphany takes place on the fringe of the Seaway, in a fragile habitat set apart from the hustle and bustle of human activity. It’s a reminder that God acts in unexpected places.

Jesus’ epiphany also occurs in an unexpected place, and it also occurs in a river. Since there is no Christmas in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus’ baptism heralds the beginning of his story; it is his epiphany. In Mark, the Beloved Child of God – God’s anointed – is made known in the wilderness. **This scene at the river Jordan takes place on the fringe of society, far from Jerusalem where religious and political**

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<sup>3</sup> Brian Mann, “Kayaking along the St. Lawrence Seaway”: <http://www.wbez.org/frontandcenter/2011-06-21/kayaking-along-st-lawrence-seaway-88131>

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 1:2.

**power resides.** There are no pomp and circumstance, no crowning, no cheers, no speech. In fact, in Mark, there is no reason to believe that anyone but Jesus witnesses “the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.” And, there is no reason to believe that anyone but Jesus hears the voice from heaven say, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Of course, as Mark’s audience, we are privileged to witness this intimate moment between Father and Son; we do hear God lovingly pronounce Jesus’ identity. **In a river in a remote countryside, the Messiah is made known to us.**

And, this Messiah arrives to shake up the world as we know it. Isaiah has prophesied that the dawn of God’s reign will be characterized by the outpouring of God’s Spirit<sup>5</sup> on God’s chosen one,<sup>6</sup> through whom God will bless the Earth and bring about justice and peace.<sup>7</sup> **New hope, new life emerging where we least expect it – this is Jesus’ divine project. And, throughout the Gospel of Mark, Jesus accomplishes the will of God in marginal places: healing the sick, forgiving sins, befriending the outcast, speaking peace to the distressed, feeding the hungry, confronting oppression, and overcoming death.**

And so, we baptize in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Just as God anointed Jesus at his baptism, so God anoints us at each of ours. Before taking the plunge, we recall that “[God’s] Spirit moved over the waters and by

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<sup>5</sup> Isa. 32:15, 44:3, 59:19.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen L. Cook:

[http://members.newproclamation.com/commentary.php?d8m=1&d8d=8&d8y=2012&atom\\_id=25905](http://members.newproclamation.com/commentary.php?d8m=1&d8d=8&d8y=2012&atom_id=25905) (See Isa. 11:2, 42:1, 59:21, 61:1).

<sup>7</sup> Isa. 32:16-17.

[God's] Word [God] created the world, calling forth life in which [God] took delight.” We remember that “through the waters of the flood [God] delivered Noah and his family, and through the sea [God] led... Israel from slavery into freedom.” And, we reaffirm that “at the river [God's] Son was baptized by John and anointed with the Holy Spirit.” **Then, that same Spirit pours over us, sweeping us up into grace, freeing us from death, and joining us to Christ in newness of life.**

And, even as we receive the gift of salvation in baptism, we also become instruments of it. God anoints us to “carry God's re-creative power into the world.”<sup>8</sup> As a result of God's love poured out for us, we “undertake a serious responsibility”<sup>9</sup> for the well-being of our world, and especially those who are most vulnerable in it. We recognize that “the deprivation of our neighbor and exploitation of creation are indications of our failure to take our baptism seriously.”<sup>10</sup>

**Dear church, *you* are God's beloved children; with *you* God is well pleased.** Let this word of grace surround you again today like the waters of baptism, and when you emerge, make your way again to the places you've been called so that together we may “bear God's creative and redeeming word to all the world.”

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<sup>8</sup> Cook.

<sup>9</sup> Bushkofsky and Satterlee, *The Christian Life*, 27.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*