

January 7, 2018 A Dramatic Crossing Over, by God Mark 1:1-13 Rev. Ross Leckie Caledon East UC

Has anyone seen the movie *The Interview*? I am sure that Sony Pictures never dreamed of all the free publicity the North Korean government would give them. I heard one review that said that it is not a very good movie. We might wonder what could be so offensive? One commentator I heard explained that in North Korea, Kim Jong-un is like a god, much like Caesar became a Roman god. So the farce in the minds of people in North Korea is not just political teasing but it offends religious sensibilities. It is like a farce about Mohammad and we saw the result of extremist attitudes a few years ago with the tragic killings in Paris, France. Staff and others of the satirical newspaper, *Charlie Hebdo* were targeted. We might be offended if people made fun of Jesus-though we don't get too concerned about the depictions, as long as they are tasteful.

We may forget that in his time, Jesus could be offensive. The phrase, "Gospel of Jesus" trips off our tongues as if that is the only gospel that ever was, but that phrase would stick in the throat of a Roman governor. The word gospel means "good news" but it was used almost exclusively to mean the good news of a military victory. It was used to declare to a conquered people the good news that they would now be ruled by the great wisdom of the divine emperor and participate in the *Pax Romana*, the peace of Rome (as long as they were obedient and subservient.)

When his followers proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus they declared the good news that now people could live under the reign of God rather than the reign of Caesar. It was a direct challenge to the imperial propaganda and power of Rome.

Mark begins his gospel of Jesus with a collection of sayings from the prophets Isaiah and Malachai. Together they say: God speaks again, God's prophesy has not been silenced for ever. God is again calling us out of the wilderness, a place of searching, of testing, and of redemption. God will show us a way, God will construct for us a way to return to God.

John's dress- camel hair and a leather belt, would have reminded the people of Elijah, which was also a prophetic and political reference. Elijah denounced the king and court of his time. He challenged King Ahab and proved that the power of God was greater than the power of the king. He fled to the wilderness because there was a price on his head for treason. The prophets predicted that the return of Elijah would inaugurate the return of God's power over the political powers of his time.

Having subverted the political authority of Rome, John also challenged the religious authority of the temple in Jerusalem by having crowds come out to the wilderness for repentance and direction. He declared that the Spirit of God would come to them through Jesus, not through the temple institutions.

John places Jesus in a direct line of descendants from Moses, Elijah, and the prophets. We are led to expect someone great and powerful and we get, Jesus from Nazareth. That is like saying, "Who's next in line? O, it's George from Alton." Nazareth is such an insignificant place that it is not even mentioned on ancient maps. The name we say as "Jesus" was actually Joshua, a common name. Jesus then is introduced as a 'nobody', or an everybody. Yes, it is for just such a seemingly 'nobody' that the heavens are torn open and the Spirit descends.

Mark's gospel is the only gospel where John actually baptizes Jesus. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. It does seem rather awkward if we interpret baptism from a strictly personal perspective? From what did Jesus need to repent? What had he done wrong? But if we read this story with its political implications and remember that to repent means not just saying sorry, or having regrets, but it means to turn away, to turn around, to change direction-then it does make sense. In his baptism Jesus was turning away, turning his back on all forms of the social, political and religious order that oppressed and controlled people. Having been baptised, Jesus went off into the wilderness to try to figure out just how one would actually live out such a baptism. Mark's telling of the story of Jesus' baptism reminds us that baptism is a dramatic act. It does not only confer on one some private spiritual benefit but with it comes a compulsion to proclaim and demonstrate the gospel of Christ, the good news that God rules our lives with justice and compassion.

Sophia and Carlos approached the guards. Their papers were in order. They had packed everything they could into their two suitcases. They waited silently, both deep in their own thoughts. Would they get through? Did they even want to do this? Once they crossed that border they knew there would be no going back. They would never again live in the land of their birth, the only land they knew. But that land was filled with trouble and heartache. A new life waited for them across the border. They didn't know exactly what that life would be like but it held the promise of peace and joy. So they waited hopefully, ready to make whatever sacrifices were necessary to build a new life in a place where democracy and justice were expected.

I have never stood at a border in those circumstances. A few years ago on our visit to England we were reminded that Jean's (my wife's) grandfather left England as a young man because he was unable to study theology in England. Relatives there now, don't remember whether he didn't have enough money or his high school marks were not high enough, but he left his farming family in Devon and moved to Winnipeg to study at Wesley College in 1905. I wonder how he even knew about a college in Winnipeg. I wonder what he thought as he stepped onto the boat.

I can only relate in a superficial way, but I always have a slight feeling of trepidation as I stand at a border handing over my passport to the guards. Maybe you have stood at such a border.

There is a sense in which we are all standing at the border between the wilderness and the promised land. Lee Barrett says that we, like John the Baptist's generation are poised between a troubled past and an unprecedented future. "Into the

wilderness of our own broken lives and our own bleeding world erupts the promise of a baptism of new life.” She suggests, “Our proper response in the present should be confession, repentance and hopeful expectation.” (Feasting on the Word)

It seems that our world is in a time of wilderness, of uncertainty and danger, of violence and destruction, of scarcity and injustice. A recent article in the Toronto Star pointed to data that indicates that the world is actually better, safer than it was. Globally fewer people are living in extreme poverty, fewer people are dying of diseases such as AIDS and malaria. The infant mortality rate is going down and vaccination rates are going up. The number of people killed in wars is going down. However, in the last few years, the gap between the rich and the poor is widening, some types of violence are increasing—terrorism globally and youth gang violence closer to home.

We are at the border. We stand here, once again, remembering Jesus’ baptism today and in a sense renewing and remembering our own. We stand here having seen the heavens torn open. We proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. We know the way into the promised land. But we stand at the border, not knowing if we will get in, if we really want to get in because once we cross the border we’re not exactly sure what will happen. As we enter into this New Year, will we cross over or let ourselves be pulled back? Will we step bravely into an unknown future, but one we only get a glimpse of when we see heaven torn open? Will we follow the Way of Jesus or turn back to the ways of the popular culture? It is not an easy choice, for many of us are content with the way things are, but not really joyful. We also know that the ways of the world implicate us in oppression and injustice. And currently the world’s ways are unsustainable politically, economically and environmentally.

A United Church of Christ (U.S.) minister, Max Grant, wonders about the drama of the heavens being “torn open”. He thinks it might be more understandable if we made baptism more dramatic. If our public declaration of faith was not just accompanied by a little sprinkling of water or even full immersion, but instead required us to skydive then we would think a whole lot differently about this. Bear with me for a minute. Think of it-free fall, then pull the rip cord, and then a gentle floating down to the ground. You would certainly be tested to put your faith in God. Then imagine what it would mean to go through that experience, with its terrors and its rushes and its ultimate relief—and then show up at church on Sunday to be greeted by a room full of people who had been through all of that too.

Think how you would see them all, the hefty, the busy, the young and the old, the happy and the sad—the people you will find in every church on any Sunday—think how you would see them all, if being baptized meant that at some point, however many years before, they had each had that day—that day when they had somehow summoned enough courage to leap out into thin air and into the hands of God..

Think about it. Think about it, because when Mark’s gospel describes the Baptism of Jesus, it’s that kind of radical act that he seems to have in mind. Mark writes that as Jesus “was coming out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and a dove descending.” Mark talks about the heavens, ‘schizo’, torn apart. It’s the same word used to describe that moment on Good Friday when the curtain of the temple is torn in two. Mark understands that in Jesus, this is exactly what has happened. God has torn open the heavens and come down. And so, for Mark, the baptism of Jesus is very clearly a radical act. In Jesus, God has committed the act of breaking and entering the world, and Mark wants the world to know.

If our deepest allegiance is to Jesus, to the life he has called us to lead, and in the manner the Gospels show he has called us, it is radical. It will bring not peace, but a sword, to so many of our relationships, to our allegiances and affiliations. That is probably not what many of us are looking for. But just what would that look like?

It is the kind of radical act that would assure Nelson Mandela that he could endure 27 years in prison, be released and lead a country through reconciliation rather than retaliation. It is the kind of radical act that brought William Wilberforce to conversion and resulted in him using his influence in British Parliament to abolish slavery in 1833, just before his death. It is the kind of radical act that has empowered people of faith to care for the dying, to work to eliminate hunger, and to work towards a world where no one is abused or refused freedom of expression.

Baptism means that God has broken through; and so we, in turn, are called to tear into the challenges and problems of the world with everything we’ve been given. It is the invitation to give our lives to something more challenging than any other kind of work—and in the end, surely more beautiful, true, and enduring than any other kind of activity.

Jesus came out of the waters and saw a vision of God, a voice of acceptance and a vision of what it was to be alive that he could give his life to. It is also what our baptism that we claim is about. Saying yes to our baptism is the daily work of the rest of our lives. It is saying yes to the world and yes to a life torn open by the love of God.

So...I suppose it’s unlikely that we’ll decide anytime soon to replace baptism by water and the spirit with baptism by gravity and parachute. But the next time you walk into a church and encounter God’s people there in all our familiar shapes and sizes, remember that what unites us all is something God’s Word tells us is even more electrifying than jumping out of a plane. In baptism, the heavens were torn apart. When we experience that and know it for ourselves it is the thrill of a lifetime. Help us to live courageously and joyfully. Take us O God, where you need us to be, what you have for us to accomplish. Take us in to your unknown future, losing our life to find it. In Jesus’ name we ask this. Amen.