

**Predigt von Pfr. Dr. Allan Boesak, Südafrika,
am Sonntag, 21. Mai 2005, 9.30 Uhr, Bartholomäuskirche,
Ev.-reformierte Gemeinde Braunschweig**

Scripture Reading: Mark 1:9-12

I

My dear sisters and brothers, I greet you in the name of our risen Lord, Jesus Christ. It is a great joy and privilege to be here with you this morning.

The gospel of Mark is the oldest gospel, it is shorter than the other three, and is still considered by many to be the source of the stories about Jesus of Nazareth. But there is something else about this gospel. There is an urgency here we do not find elsewhere in the New Testament. The rhythm is different, the stories shorter, tighter, more compressed and compelling. It is as if Mark is afraid he will not have enough time to tell his story and to make his point.

Mark does not have time for stories of Jesus' birth with shepherds and wise men and angels. The "beginning" of his gospel does not include extended genealogies or philosophical reflections; instead it confronts us directly with the ministry of Jesus. This is how we get to know Jesus in this gospel, and this is how we are introduced to him: "Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee". Not from Jerusalem the centre of power and well spring of political intrigue and conspiracy; not from the place of the palace and the temple; not from among those with status and power and honour, but from the periphery, from among those dishonoured and despised, the little people of God. From Galilee.

Jesus' baptism is the pronouncement of Jesus as the Messiah, the anointed one, the one sent by God, the one chosen by God. He comes to proclaim the reality of the kingdom of God on earth, and he comes to take up the battle with the powers that stand in the way of God's Kingdom. His coming is "good news", because he comes to confront the powers of evil who are out to attack God's people, to crush their dreams, to steal their faith, to destroy both their humanity and their future. He has come. He is here. The world should know.

And Mark wastes no time to get there. It takes Matthew as well as Luke three chapters to tell us this. Mark takes only nine verses.

At the baptism of Jesus, an open, public event, remarkable things happen. First, Mark tells us, the heavens are “torn apart”. Second, the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus, and third, there is a voice from heaven.

There are the most marvelous paintings depicting Jesus at his baptism standing in the river, his hands folded in prayer, his eyes cast heavenward, while a dove hovers gently just over his head. It might be beautiful, but it is not what Mark has in mind. Mark’s language is explicit. Matthew speaks of the heavens “that opened above him”, and Luke writes as if a curtain is quietly drawn aside, but Mark says that the heavens are “torn apart”. There is force at work here. There is power manifested here. The distance between heaven and earth has become too great, the wall between God and humans too thick, too high, too dense. The difference between heaven and earth had become too much to bear. So God acts with power.

The Spirit that descends on him is not a dove, she is *like* a dove. It is the only way the gospel writers can describe it. How else could Mark describe this stunning phenomenon but in reference to the dove sent by God to tell of a new world, a new beginning, after the devastation of the flood? (Gen. 8:11)

In Genesis 6 God rents the heavens with the power of his judgement, and the flood overruns the earth. This time God rents the heavens with the power of his mercy. It is the power of love that is at work here. It is a love that is burning with rebelliousness and impatience. Mark has understood Isaiah well. “Therefore the LORD waits impatiently to be gracious to you, therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you.” (Is. 30:18) It is with that divine impatience that God is tearing the heavens apart. God cannot wait. And the Spirit, descending upon Jesus like a dove, is the Spirit of renewal, a sign of the power that has not come to destroy but to begin again.

“It is enough!”, says God. When will you cease your disobedience and your unwillingness to do what is right? When will you cease to destroy the earth that I have given in your care? When will you begin to share my vision of peace, of a world where war has come to an end, where every sword shall be turned into plow shares? When will you learn to do what is right to the poor, the despised and the excluded, so that justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream? When will you believe that true transformation will come not through might or power, but through my Spirit? When will you learn to accept my love

and my mercy? When will you learn that love for God and for the other, that respect for nature and solidarity with one another is the key to the salvation of the world?

“The time has come!”, says God. And God tears the heavens apart. The boundaries between heaven and earth are crossed. That which God wills in heaven, becomes God’s will on earth. What God wills in heaven, that Jesus will do on earth. Hence the voice from heaven: “You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased”. Hence also Mark’s telling of the second time the voice came, with the second affirmation: “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!” (9:7) Upon him rests the Spirit of the Lord.

III

That is the Spirit that “drives” Jesus into the desert. Matthew and Luke found that word too harsh. They would rather speak of Jesus being “led” into the wilderness by the Spirit. But Mark is adamant: he knows that no one goes into that wilderness *voluntarily*. Jesus is not lured there by Satan, he is not brought there under false pretenses, he is *driven*.

Like all Jews, Mark knows the desert as the place of testing, of waiting, of preparation. It is also a place of loneliness, of endless wanderings, of pain and hunger, of suffering and struggle, a place at the edge of hopelessness. It is a place where one’s faith is tested and one’s trust is challenged. The wilderness is a place where temptation cannot be avoided, it has to be confronted and resisted. And Jesus would rather have let it pass, as he would have the cup he spoke of in Gethsemane. But he had to – he was driven.

He had to – for how else would he have been able to stand in our place? How else would he know of *our* wilderness experiences if he had not been there himself? For “although being a Son” says that shocking verse from Hebrews (5:8), “he learned obedience through what he suffered”. He had to learn to say, “not my will, but Your will be done”. It all begins not in Gethsemane, but here, in the wilderness. But the Spirit remains with him, forty days and nights. She never leaves him.

And this is what we have to know and remember. No matter how far we are driven into the wilderness, no matter how intense the pain and the loneliness, no matter how deep the hunger and thirst, no matter how overwhelming our feelings of rejection and fear; no matter how fierce the temptations – the Spirit of God will never leave us on our own.

That is, I think, what it means to be baptized with the Holy Spirit. Not as a sign of status above others; not with an overflow of ecstasy; not when I speak in tongues no one can understand or interpret but it proves my "holiness". But that Jesus blesses me with the Spirit that he has received. The Spirit who teaches me wisdom and discernment, who gives me faith and courage, who empowers me to know compassionate justice.

Whoever believes in Jesus Christ, who commits himself and herself to him, receives the Spirit in all her power. It is the power to give ourselves the way Jesus gave himself. It is the power to love the way Jesus loved. It is the power to let people see the very heart of God in what we are, say and do. To let the world see that the way to God is not closed, that the heavens are open, torn apart by a God whose impatience to love, to forgive and to reconcile is seen in the One who was baptized, who loved and healed, who saved us all by his sacrificial love, upon whom the Spirit rested, and who calls us all to new life.

Amen