

Much, Much More
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Mark 1:4-11
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In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. (Genesis 1:1-5).

These are the very first words we hear about God. And I don't know about you, but I love these words.

Some scholars describe the scene like this: God creates order out of chaos. Or God tames the chaos monster. Here's how I imagine it: There are all these bits of matter, and they are just floating around the universe, maybe even being swirled around like popcorn kernels in a popcorn popper, or like the organs of fair-goers riding the Tilt-a-Whirl. But all that movement just keeps thrusting the original matter into darkness, and even more darkness. The world is void of purpose. And form. And function. And matter that matters.

And out of this nothingness, the Creator offers something-ness. Lots of somethings!!! The Creator offers a warm embrace, and whispers: "There's something more. Much more." And then there was light! And from that light, a good world filled with good things and good creatures, and collectively deemed very good.

Fast forward to the First Century. The Universe has been created. If we go by Matthew's Gospel, we're 42 generations removed from Noah and the flood, and a long, long way from the primordial world. And while the universe is fully formed, there's still a lot of matter that doesn't seem to matter.

And then a special child comes into the world. Some call him Messiah. Some the Son of Man. And here's the thing: this child seems to disrupt a pattern of boggy nothingness. It was as if Israel lived in perpetual slumber, enslaved to one despot after another. This year, it just so happened to be Rome. Sure, there were crops to harvest, chores to be done, and kingdoms to help sustain, and even families to love and feed. But there seemed to be a lack of animation in the nation's motions – people lived life as if they were matter being tossed about with no direction or purpose. They lived as if God was absent in the world.

But this child, Jesus, he signals God's arrival in the world, and God's presence to both Jew and Gentile alike. He is light in a dark place. This child tells the world, "There's something more. Much, much more!" We call this event Epiphany – we celebrated it in a formal way yesterday, but the season will last for a few more weeks.

But much like the light on Day One was just the beginning of Creation, Epiphany is only the beginning of what's to come.

In Mark's Gospel, we skip the birth and youth of Jesus, and go straight to the beginning of his ministry. Today, Baptism of the Lord Sunday, is the first step in the creation of Jesus' earthly ministry, and of ours as well. And I dare say, it's the most important step.

Epiphany is the announcement of God's arrival in the world. Jesus' baptism, and each of ours as well, is the acknowledgement that God's arrival matters. And it's the acknowledgment that God's presence can transform our present.

Today's lection mentions John, the original Baptist, and forgiveness from sin, and people flocking to the Judean countryside for repentance, and camel hair coats, and locusts, and wild honey, and worthiness and unworthiness, and baptism by water, and of fire and the Holy Spirit, and a Papa God whose mighty proud of his beloved boy. And I suppose I could provide commentary on all of these things. They are worthy topics to be sure.

But today, I'd rather you focus on the whole of this narrative. Here's what I believe happened. Jesus reached back through space and time, and somehow, somehow he connected himself to an ancient, primordial action. God made order out of chaos. And God created light. And God whispered, "There's something more. Much, much more!"

And right then and right there, Jesus determined that he would no longer be pinballed about in a world of nothingness; he would no longer subscribe to the idea that things were more important than people; he would no longer be blinded to the cruelty of a domination system; he would no longer be swept up in the cyclones that chased wealth and power and privilege and might; he would no longer believe that God was in anyway disconnected from the present.

And I think he jumped in the Jordan, not to scrub off sin and depravation like you and I would scrub off our daily germs with soap and a washcloth in our nightly shower. Instead, I think Jesus jumped in the river to say, I have seen God's light; I have felt the warmth of God's light; and this water's gonna remind me of the way God's light can transform the present. And I think that Jesus did this act with such conviction, and such devotion, and such authenticity, and such sincerity, and even such boisterousness, that God couldn't help but proclaim: "Amen!!!"

And then, this is the best part, Jesus went out and lived with God's light. He lived. He really, really lived. He lived as if God was present, here, now, among us. Every moment, every conversation, every action, every encounter was used to bring light into a dark and dreary world.

But be careful. I think often times we have a tendency to move straight from Jesus' birth and baptism to the events of Easter. And I promise you, we'll get to Jerusalem at some point this spring. But for a while, we'll linger in the story of Jesus' ministry. After all, it took six more days for light to evolve into its final form. And it'll take Jesus several more years before he fully understands his calling. And along the way, he'll spend time in the wilderness, and teach new disciples, eat lots of meals (more than Sardis does if you can believe it!), and perform miracles, both of the ordinary and extraordinary variety. And he'll know love and heartache and pain and grief and joy and laughter and crying and praying and pleading and begging and traveling and all that life's commotion brings. But through it all, he'll remember God's promise of light, God's promise of presence, and God's promise of something more. Much much more!

I have a confession to make. I am filled with a mix of anxiety and hope in this new year.

I worry about our world. I worry what will happen in Jerusalem and Syria and North Korea and Charlotte, and whatever other place the next Tweetstorm will disrupt.

I worry for my family – what will our security look like in the year ahead: our jobs, our healthcare, our home, even if the city will pick up all of our bagged leaves?

And then I get to worrying about our neighbors with less fortune – the ones who need homes and clothes and food and love, real love. What will happen to them in this cold front?

And as your pastor, I worry about Sardis, and our ability to do the really important work: Can we make a dent in helping the people who need it most? Is the church still relevant in a world that's becoming ever-more secular? How can we be a sanctuary for people the church has wounded?

And because I'm your pastor, my mind also wanders from thinking about the really important work we should be doing to thinking too much about the work we think is really important: will we have enough to fill the offering plates; and will enough people sign up to greet, and take offering, and teach our young ones, and manicure our grounds, and fix that alarm that keeps beeping at 2 a.m. every Thursday night; and are the candles gonna burn all the way through service, and is somebody gonna remember to pick up the chicken for Wednesday night supper? And oh by the way, what color should our stoles be today, and did I put an extra o in doxology in the worship guide?

I am anxious.

But then I hear today's text. And I remember that God is present. I remember that there is light in the world. And I remember that there is much, much more than darkness.

I hope, because I remember 50-plus miles walked for CROP Walk, and enough dollars raised to build a drinking well; and I remember medicine bottles filled with spare change; and letters and donations to churches affected by gun violence and hurricanes; and 450 pounds of canned food; and a truckload of school supplies; and a music camp; and anthems from a choir; and prayers – real, genuine prayers -- written and shared by the people of this place; and worship with Muslim brothers and sisters; and congregants who offered care to people in need of healing from sickness and loss and grief and loneliness.

And look out on the front lawn – there's grass, hallelujah there's grass!!!

Here's why today is important. When we, like Jesus, recognize God's light in the world, and determine to cloak ourselves in such light, we begin to let our hope for what the world can be outweigh our anxiety about what we think it can't be.

And Friends, when we, like Jesus, determine to live each and every moment in a spirit-filled manner, we have the power to transform the present one action, one conversation, one meal, one relationship at a time.

Friends, today is our baptism. It's a chance to seize God's light. And it's a chance to make our matter matter.

May it be so. And may it be soon. And may it be much, much more. Amen.