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January 10, 2021

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT  
Baptism of our Lord, Year B

Psalm 29; Mark 1:1-13

The light shines in the darkness, **and the darkness did not overcome it. Amen**

Mark begins his account of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection by telling us that this story about this person is good news! Jesus is the Christ, or Chosen One, THE Son of God.

What kind of good news have you heard lately? One of the memes going around Facebook this week says, "I'd like to cancel my subscription for 2021. The 7-day free trial period is up and I'm not interested."

These last few days, this time in history, is not the only time good news has been hard to find. I think it's important to keep that perspective. Personally, nationally, and globally there are days and seasons and years that seem to be filled with more trouble than others, when we long to hear good news.

Mark jumps straight into the ministry of Jesus, beginning with his baptism. And as we consider that important event for Jesus—and for us who are also baptized as he was—I want to direct our attention to the person who is the primary actor—God.

We do not see God in this event, but we see the heavens torn apart, we hear God's voice proclaim Jesus as God's Son, the Beloved, and witness the Spirit of God descend on Jesus as a dove, the symbol of peace.

All of this is an echo of Psalm 29 that we read together this morning. I invite you to have that handy as we look at this psalm together a little more closely.

"Ascribe [or give] to the LORD, you gods"—or you heavenly beings—"ascribe to the LORD glory and strength...the glory due God's name." We are called to praise God as the angels do, to give to God the glory that belongs only to God.

Why would we need to be reminded of that? Because we want to claim glory for ourselves. We want to give glory and strength to other people. We want to put our leaders and celebrities and even one another on pedestals, where human beings do not belong.

When the people came to the Jordan to be baptized, they wanted to give John the glory. No, John said, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me...he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit," the Spirit of God.

We, too, must be careful about who we glorify and ascribe/give power. Yes, there are people who hold positions of authority and power in our world, but they do not hold the kind of power we sometimes expect of them. Whether we serve as presidents, pastors, or even parents our human power is not ultimate or flawless. We are to look only to God for that power.

The Psalm goes on to talk about God's glory and strength. Using the metaphor of thunder for the voice of God, we get a sense of the power of God's voice to make things happen. Seven times (remember, seven is the number of perfection or completeness) the psalmist declares the strength of God's voice.

God's voice thunders over the waters, like at the birth of creation when chaos and darkness was brought into order and light. The voice of God is strong enough to destroy that which seems indestructible, and to bring joy and delight. The voice of God disturbs and makes all of creation take notice of what God is up to. And in response, the people of God are meant to respond with their own voices in shouts of "Glory!" to God's great strength and power.

The strength and power of God can be frightening—as frightening as a thunderstorm or a hurricane or tornado. But that is not how God literally employs power. The voice of God speaks to overturn the destructive forces in the world, to tear open our power-hungry hearts.

When Jesus came up out of the waters of the Jordan river, Mark says the heavens were torn apart! The dome of the sky God created as a boundary between the heavens and the earth was torn open. In Jesus God made a way for humanity to be united with God as God intended in the beginning.

In the concluding verses of our Psalm, the LORD gives to his people a gift. In this translation, the psalmist seems to be hoping, but in other translations it is stated as a fact.

The LORD gives strength to his people! And, as the poetry of the psalms often do, the second line repeats the first in a slightly different way. The LORD blesses his people with peace!

The strength of God we carry with us as God's beloved children is the peace that comes from God, given to us, as it was to Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit in our baptisms.

Jesus took this strength with him into the wilderness, where he was tempted by Satan. Jesus became God's voice in the world, and wielded the power of peace by acts of forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation. He tore open the barriers and crossed the boundaries humanity uses to divide, so that we could be reunited with God and with one another.

We, too, take the strength of God's peace given to us by the Spirit into the wilderness of this life that can seem chaotic and filled with trouble. We carry the strength of God's peace to stand firm in times of trial and lend our voices to bring about healing and hope. We carry the strength of God's peace as we point to the fullness of God's power at work in the world.

Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace we just celebrated at Christmas, is the embodiment of God's powerful peace. His love and life are the good news we seek in times of trouble.

This was a difficult week in our country—both in the events at the Capital, and in the ways people have responded to one another with judgement, rejection, and condemnation. This is not who we are as people who belong to God.

We are God's children, loved and commissioned in Holy Baptism to serve the world with the gifts we have been given—trust in God's power and presence in the world, and the peace of God to share with our neighbor. May our voices proclaim this good news and give glory to God alone.

Thanks be to God. Amen