January 11, 2015 First Sunday after the Epiphany

All Saints’ Church Year B

Genesis 1:1-5 Acts 19:1-7

Psalm 29 Mark 1:4-11

In our Bible Study on Thursdays, we are reading the gospel of Mark, and we are learning that our gospel writer focuses on Jesus’ power and authority. Jesus is taking on Evil. He has the power to confront it, to suppress it, and to rule over it. Jesus’ authority is key to understanding the gospel of Mark. From where does this power come?

Mark is intent on answering this question. He opens his gospel with Jesus’ baptism. For Mark, this is his “Christmas narrative.” Rather than talk about the birth of the baby Jesus, Mark is introducing us to the birth of Jesus’ ministry. This is the beginning of how Mark wants to answer his question about power.

There is a rush; things happen immediately. Mark is in hurry as he writes; even the opening sentence is not a complete sentence. There is urgency. Our gospel writer harkens to the opening of Genesis, where a formless void covered the face of the deep and God creates something out of nothing.

Out of the deep waters of the Jordan, Jesus rises, the sky is rent open, torn apart, and God speaks. It is good. God is pleased with his beloved Son.

As Jesus rises out of the water, so, we do, too. We rise.

As Jesus is baptized, we are all ordained. The priesthood of all believers is created, is born, is shared as new life…. in this instance….in this baptism. Life will never be the same. What birth are we witnessing? The birth of the Holy Spirit. This is our epiphany. This is not John’s baptism of repentance; this is a baptism of the Holy Spirit. This is power; this is authority. This is new life; evil has no sway.

In Acts, the same thing is happening. Both Peter and Paul are struggling to understand this new thing in their midst- the appearance of the Christ. They are trying to make sense of Jesus’ resurrection within their own Judaism. Maybe this means that the Gentiles can join the faith without the requirements of dietary laws and circumcision. What a radical idea! This feels liberating and inclusive. They feel empowered by their invitation to non-Jews.

But they don’t know radical. God is way ahead of them. You see, Jesus, as the Christ, has also appeared to the Gentiles. Cornelius has had his own theophany. And so when Peter comes to him with this very open invitation to become “pure,” Cornelius balks. He doesn’t need Peter’s invitation; he has his own voice, his own validation, his own experience of the Christ. Cornelius has been possessed by God and he knows it.

We are in the middle of a paradigm shift. Those in power think that inviting others in to the power base is a sign of hospitality and graciousness. Yet, those outside of the faith still feel like guests. “Ok, you’ve made accommodations for me, an exception, even, to let me in. Somehow you have found a way to water down your faith to include me. “

But there is something here that is not quite right. Think of all the colleges and prep schools, around the 70’s that “invited girls to apply.” And the girls and women came, but it took years for schools to change their culture of being a “boys’ school. That’s because girls were always guests at the bequest of the boys. The same thing happened with the feminist movement that was initiated by white women. When women of color were “invited” to be a part of the movement, they had different ideas. They wanted a role in the vision of the movement.

For Cornelius, there is a new thing that he has not only witnessed, but experienced. It is not about “lessening” the dietary requirements, or looking the other way about circumcision. Something new is afoot; creation itself has been let loose. And he has been invited, not by Peter or Paul, but by God through the Living Christ. Things are dying so new life can reign.

This is why the question in Acts is so important: “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?”

Remember Mark’s emphasis on power. It comes from one source: The Holy Spirit.

This is a new land beckoning all of us. We are no longer Greek, Jew, man, woman, poor, rich, healthy, sick, king, pauper, insider, outsider, Christian, non-Christian. We are all invited to a new creation, in which God is well pleased: It’s the *Life of the Spirit*. We have been ordained. We are on equal footing and all are needed to build the kingdom of God. The church is not dying, but it is experiencing a new beckoning. The Holy Spirit is alive and moving, in places unimaginable.

This week, my daughter’s car’s “check engine” light came on. Oh dear. I know so little about cars, so I drove it down the street to literally the first mechanic shop I came across. I walked in and asked the nice man whose head was inside someone else’s car engine, if he could help me. He put everything down and came to my assistance. And we began to talk. As my custom, I told him who I was, and explained that I was the new rector of All Saints’. We talked about the car and he fixed it. He charged me a couple of bucks and I protested that I owed him more. “Absolutely not.”

As I was walking out, I heard, “Jamie, please take one of these. I don’t go to church; I don’t belong anywhere but this prayer is key to my life.” And he handed me a homemade book marker with the Serenity prayer typed on it.

“Oh isn’t this, what it’s all about,” I responded.

And then he went on to say that he buys ten Bibles at a time, “The Book” because it is easy to read, and he gives them out to people and when the ten are gone, he buys ten more. “I start each of my mornings with Scripture, and I always read a Proverb…..there’s thirty one; one for each day of the month.”

“Cool, I never made that connection. We parted ways, and the next day I called Mickey and asked if I could reference our conversation in my sermon. “Sure.”

“Can I use your name?”

“Sure. People will know me, Mickey Maguire, but they probably don’t know much about me.”

“Maybe, one day, Mickey, we can work together. You have a lot to give.”

“I like that idea.”

The Holy Spirit. It’s moving; there is a new creation in our midst. And it’s very exciting.

We are on a new ship, and we need all hands on deck. The church as we know it is changing, but this is good news. New partners are just around the corner; walls are breaking down, hands are being extended. We have so much to give; and so much to receive.

Why do I share with you this encounter with Mickey? He has been possessed by God. He is experiencing the Divine Heart of God. His risk of sharing his experience with the Living Christ with me in his shop is Church. I am not sure how this is all going to look in the future, but I do know this:

In a world marked by poverty, hunger, fear, and by those who reign with terror, like the murderers in Paris, the Holy Spirit is moving. It has power. Evil will not win. A new creation is swirling. The Divine Heart of God is beating. We are a part of that beat.

Buckle your seat belts. The Holy Spirit is taking us for a ride.

AMEN