

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany – February 1, 2009
The Rev. Dr. Charles D. Bang

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

*"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;*

³*the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*

*'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,'"*

⁴*John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

⁹*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.*

¹⁰*And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

¹²*And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*

¹⁴*Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news."*

¹⁶*As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea — for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." ¹⁸And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.*

²¹*They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.*

²²*They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.*

²⁷*They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching —*

with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸*At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.*
Amen.

It's going to happen today. The referees will gather the two team captains, one from Pittsburgh and one from Arizona, and the referee will ask one of them to choose heads or tails and, after showing the commemorative coin to both players, will toss it in the air, making it flip over and over eventually landing on the field. He will declare the result and then ask the winning team captain to choose for his team whether they will kick off or whether they will receive. The captain then has to make the first decision of the day and he will do so based on where the wind is, if there is any sunlight left, and will instantly decipher a thousand different alternatives only to remember that in the locker room moments before, the coach will have told him what to do and that he had better remember what he was told. He will choose to receive.

That's when it will happen, the commentators will begin barraging us with statistics on how many other teams choose to receive first and won the whole shebang. He will be contradicted and chastised by no manner of other great prognosticators in the booth with him at the time, but he will stick to his statement and declare one of the two the winner, even before the first play is made.

It'll happen so fast, you'll barely have time to dunk your first chip into the salsa, your beer will still have a head on it and the game will be over.

In a way, that's the way the gospel of Mark begins. I just read to you a moment before, the first 28 verses of the text, and by the time we got to verse 28, Jesus was born, grew up, and was with John when he appeared in the wilderness baptizing. He baptizes Jesus, the voice from heaven tells us who he really is, he calls his disciples, and goes to his first town, Capernaum and there is confronted by a man possessed of an evil spirit, whom he exorcizes, and people everywhere begin to hear about who he is and what he is able to accomplish. His fame spreads which is what brings him to the attention of not only the Roman authorities but also the Jewish religious elite, the Pharisees and the scribes, and we begin to see, already here in the first 28 verses, what will be his end.

I've told you before in other venues, that Mark's gospel wastes no time, he wants to get to the resurrection story as soon as possible and so the whole rest of his book is really just introductory. The resurrection is all that matters, for therein lies the hope for the reader. Not much else matters. The fact that he descended from David, or that angels announced his birth or that wise were led by a star to his birthplace, or that his mother was a virgin, or that he father was a carpenter, or, for that matter that demons knew who he was and responded to his commands, or that he healed someone blind since birth, or turned water into wine. All that really matters is that he was obedient to God, remained faithful to God's promise and that God remained faithful to His, that in the end, God is there, and we are with God.

All things considered, that's what all this is about, isn't it?

- That's what Krystin's solo is all about
- our choir's anthem this morning,-
- the introit-
- the motet-
- the pictures in the stained glass windows tell the same story.
- the angels in the back, another version
- Jesus blessing the children in the side window.
- The saints whose lives are depicted in the front window.
- The prodigal son who is welcomed home by his father.
- The empty tomb.
- The reminders of the bread and wine which makes real again the presence of Christ and the story his life and death told.

If you want to stretch the point, you can even say that's why we're going to have this silly coffee hour with Super Bowl type snacks and why I played the goofy sports trivia game and why you came and why you sat down next to so and so, it's because we have built this community around one very simple truth, that God loves us, and we come here each week to remind each other of that. When your portfolio is in the toilet, when 100,000 people lose their jobs, when your brother in law dies from a single vessel that bled in his head, when your father dies after struggling to live for so many months, when you hear of people slaughtered in the Middle East, of soldiers dying in Iraq, you need to have a place to come where all of that can be processed and shared and held up against that one thing that will bring you hope and solace and comfort, the fact that we are all God's and God will keep us, now and then.

When you share the peace today, it is that piece we offer to one another. So today, when that moment comes in our service, look the other person straight in the eye, look into their lives, their soul, and see there whatever hurts or pains that are there, whatever burdens they may be carrying, whatever sorrow still lingers, grab hold of their hand and risk a germ or two, and tell them that the peace that only God can give is always theirs and always yours, to share and rely upon.

So... the peace of the Lord be with you always. Amen.