

First Sunday of Epiphany – January 7, 2018, Year B

**St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas GA**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Mark 1:7-11

***“See the Signs”***

In this Sunday's Gospel lesson, we are blessed with a lesson of Jesus' baptism and in that baptism when Jesus arose from the water. Mark describes it this way: *“as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove and a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”* How absolutely remarkable - heaven being torn open – and there, for the very first time we are presented with the incredible presence of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. WOW – you want to talk about signs! Remarkably, this event is recorded in all four Gospels – Mark 1:9, John 1:29, Matthew 3:13, and Luke 3:21. This event is so special that it needed to be included by all of the evangelists, the Gospel writers. If this were today – believe it or not, it would be on every network – so that the Word would get out. (Whether they wanted to put the Name of Jesus on the air or not!) It is the undeniable truth – and God stresses the importance that Baptism should have in our lives. It also indicates the importance of water in our lives – for cleansing and refreshing – and also for nourishment.

In Matthew 3:13-17 God the Father spoke and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove, above Jesus the Son, – and so the Holy Trinity affirmed the divinity of Jesus, the fact that He is God – in the very same water that parted so that the Ark of the Covenant could cross on “dry land” into the Promised Land – as told to us in Joshua chapter 3, when the feet of the priests touched the water – the water rolled back. God was giving Israel, and us, a reminder that they were entering the Promised Land the same way they left slavery and Egypt – as recorded in Exodus (on dry ground) – by His sign, His miracle, and His power!

This event took place just north of the Dead Sea, across from Jericho in the very same water from which Elijah's chariot of fire would ascend into heaven – after the waters parted for Elijah by his touching that water with his mantle; and then Elisha also parted them with Elijah's mantle. *“And when he also had struck the waters, they were divided here and there; and Elisha crossed over.”* (2 Kings 2:14) These were times that God parted the waters – once at the Red Sea and three times at the Jordan River as a sign of His presence and power – covering His people. And now we read of John the Baptist giving further proclamation of Jesus' identity for all to hear – at a spot in the Jordan near Jericho. Only this time the waters weren't parted – but instead the heavens were – as the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus -- and God the Father spoke. This was no ordinary place – and this as we well know, is no ordinary man! God the Father speaking was a sign that pointed directly to His Son, Jesus and God the Holy Spirit appeared as the sign of a dove which also pointed directly to Jesus. This is clear evidence that Jesus is the promised Messiah – God's anointed Son – who would carry our sins to the cross and teach us how to live.

We simply cannot escape God's signs. Isn't it remarkable how God works? In all of the Gospels we see signs, again and again; we cannot escape it! The Greek word in the New Testament for sign is σημεῖον (*semeion*) which not only means sign – but it is also means wonder and is the

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word for miracle. The life and teachings of Jesus – are filled with signs and miracles – you can't miss them! You might say – how can one word have so many uses? Well, another word has many meanings – love – has three meanings - for in Greek there is “philos” or brotherly love, and then there is “eros” which is bodily love, and you have “agape” which is unconditional love. This semeion, if you read the Gospels, there are signs all over the place. And so, I ask you - Is it any wonder? We encounter sign after sign – all pointing to the fulfillment of prophesy, pointing to the identity of Jesus, and to God's most wonderful plan of salvation for those He loves – which will ultimately point to the cross.

In John's Gospel– John the Baptist proclaims Jesus to be the “*Lamb of God.*” Many of us have heard and are familiar with the term “*Lamb of God*” – and this is significant. John the Baptist would himself be a sign - pointing away from himself and pointing towards Jesus – specifically as God's sacrificial Lamb. Right here – he tells us not only who Jesus is – but he tells us why Jesus must die such a sacrificial death on the cross – for the sins of the whole world. That is a wonder in itself! Only God could pay this perfect price – so that He could provide perfect justice – and free us from our sins – as the ultimate and perfect atonement.

John the Baptist simply testified to what he witnessed; to what he saw and heard – that Jesus as the Messiah would baptize with the Holy Spirit. Most Jewish groups in Jesus' time believed that the Holy Spirit was not as active in prophetic inspiration as it was in the Old Testament. They felt that God had stopped speaking to them through His Holy Spirit when the last Old Testament prophets (Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi) died. For many of the people who listened to John's claim that through Jesus - the Holy Spirit was present, and that Jesus would be baptizing people with the Holy Spirit, it must mean that the Messiah had come or was near.

Jesus did not officially begin His public ministry until John the Baptist had been put in prison. Do you remember John's words that “*After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.*” (John 1:30) John was physically born first – as you remember that his mother Elizabeth was pregnant when Mary came to visit - and the child John leapt in her womb at the presence of Our Lord Jesus in Mary's womb. That in itself is a sign for us of Christ's identity as the Messiah, but my point is that John's words “*after me*” I believe signified that Jesus would begin His ministry “*after*” John. Right after His Baptism, Jesus would go off into the wilderness where He fasted for forty days and forty nights – and was tempted by Satan – but did not sin. Following Jesus' temptation in the wilderness – He went to the Galilee region – and met the beginning of the twelve disciples at Capernaum – where they lived and worked as fishermen.

Jesus went to the Galilee where His ministry would have its formal beginning. Jesus was prepared by His baptism in the Jordan and the temptation in the wilderness, and now the stage was fully set. Word would come that John had been arrested and therefore the work of the one who “*prepared the way of the Lord*” was complete. Jesus goes to Nazareth and to Capernaum beside the sea. Jesus begins to proclaim the presence of the kingdom of God by word and by deed (or action) – as Matthew writes “*teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the*

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*Gospel of the kingdom and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people.”* (Matthew 4:23) We read this morning that Isaiah said the Messiah would be a light to the Gentiles, open eyes of the blind, free captives from prison, and release from the dungeons those who live in darkness. That was the prophesy that Jesus would fulfill. John the Baptist was telling people to “*repent for the kingdom of God is near*” (to turn away from their behavior) and I do believe that Jesus said the same thing. Indeed – Jesus is a great light who appears to those who sit in darkness. Is it any wonder?

There would be one more time where God the Father would speak similar words to the world – and that was on the mountain of “Transfiguration.” Jesus took Peter James and John (the inner circle) to a mountain in the north of Israel, and “*a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. **Listen to him!**"*” (Matthew 17:5) It just makes me wonder why the world has such a hard time taking those words and signs to heart – and doing what they say!