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Sermon for January 8, 2012

Baptism of the Lord Sunday
Year B

Scripture Text: Mark 1:4-11

The Invasion of Earth

A familiar and recurring theme in Science Fiction/Horror productions over the years has been the invasion of Earth. Whether it is such classics as *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* or Orson Wells' classic Halloween radio drama *War of the Worlds* or more recent movies such as *Independence Day* people in this country and around the world have been fascinated with the idea that we are not alone in this universe and that there is probably some species of extraterrestrial space travelers that are at this very moment hurtling themselves toward our planet with the specific desire of eliminating life as we know it for their own gain. In fact so drummed into our general psyche are these ideas that there is no end to the websites, publications, blogs or chat rooms on this and all related topics. Whether it is some history channel program that attempts to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that we here on earth have been visited more than once by some superior beings from some far off planet or whether it is some ongoing stream of consciousness blog about all of the hidden secrets that are contained within the mysterious Area 51 in Southern Nevada or whether it is yet another report of some strange sighting in Roswell, New Mexico; there is an ongoing attraction to the idea that aliens from some distant world have in the past or are right now living among us earthlings and there is, in some folks at least, an underlying sense of dread that comes to the surface anytime there is talk about some sort of an unearthly force invading our planet.

Fortunately for the first hearers of the Gospel of Mark, no such websites, or chat rooms or the like permeated their lives, so when they read or heard this compact and terse story about the baptism of Jesus in the Judean wilderness outside of Jerusalem on the banks of the Jordan River they were not distracted by talk of invading extraterrestrials or hidden secrets in mysterious military compounds; rather they were left free to ponder what the writer of Mark was proclaiming when he wrote that the heavens were torn apart and the Spirit of God plummeted down from those torn open heavens like a dove diving out of the sky. Using the words *Schisomenous*, which literally means to rip open or to tear apart, to describe the opening of the heavens that Jesus witnessed after his baptism and *Katabainon*, which contains the meanings of being thrown down or plummeting down, to describe the descending of the Holy Spirit upon

Jesus, the writer of Mark paints a picture that is far from the more serene images we often hold about the aftermath of Jesus' baptism. So vivid and startling are these images in the Gospel of Mark that we like those first hearers can do nothing less than stop in our tracks and consider anew what we are being told in this baptismal story; for like it or not, the picture being painted is nothing short of an invasion of earth.

I have often used the phrase "Gospel in Miniature" to describe a portion of one of the gospel narratives in the Bible. The meaning of that phrase is that within a smaller portion of text one can discover the entirety of that particular Gospel Narrative being played out in some compact and illustrative way. This story in the Gospel of Mark about Jesus' baptism is one example of this idea of the Gospel of Mark in miniature; for in this short narrative we come face to face with who this person Jesus is, what his ministry is all about, how that ministry will unfold as the story of Mark unfolds, and what therefore we as disciples of Jesus are called to attend to in our own lives right here and now.

As the scene unfolds we witness John the Baptizer doing what he has been called to do, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and thus preparing the way for the one who is to come who will not only baptize with the Holy Spirit but who will initiate, for the writer of Mark, the new reality of God's presence in the world and the dawning of the reign of God on and over all the universe. Dressed in the garb of the prophet Elijah, John the Baptizer emerges from the wilderness to call the people of God to take the first step in recognizing God's redemptive action in the world by repenting or turning away from lives that did not hold a relationship to God as central and turning back around to the covenantal relationship that God had and continues to offer. This call included the invitation to baptism, not as a means to salvation but in recognition that the life that includes God is a life that is open to recognizing the redemptive and loving relationship that is present and available. In other words what John was proclaiming was that one cannot recognize that their sins are and will continue to be forgiven as long as one is blind to the reality of the sin that infects their lives; but when one takes a moment to turn away from all that keeps them from God then one will be able to see that God has and will forgive.

Then in the midst of all that was taking place in that wilderness along the Jordan River comes Jesus. His coming has been foretold by John already but there is no recognition, in the Gospel of Mark by either John or the crowds, that this one called Jesus is the one whom all have been waiting for. Now much has been made over the years about Jesus being baptized. Volumes have been written pondering why it was necessary for Jesus to be baptized, wondering whether the writer of Mark was suggesting that Jesus was neither divine nor aware of his true identity until after the moment of his baptism, or even wondering whether Jesus himself had sins to turn away from and only when he did was adopted by God as God's beloved son. And while these can be provocative and interesting theological questions, and are to those of us who like to delve into such topics, for me they all miss the point of this narrative in Mark's gospel. For me, the crux of the issue is to follow the action and ask what does it tell us about God, about Christ and about us.

It is no accident that, in the Gospel of Mark, the only two parties to witness the tearing apart of the heavens and the descending of the Spirit on Jesus are Jesus himself and the readers or hearers

of this Gospel. This is the case because the purpose of Jesus' baptism is to make it clear to all who would take the time to listen to and fully attend to the Gospel story that Jesus is God's divine and beloved son; Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, the one who has come in the name of the lord to embody for all God's divine and infinite love. But it is also no accident that, in this very same Gospel, the opening of the heavens and the descending of the Holy Spirit are described in such vivid and arresting terms because it is the clear and definite desire of the writer of Mark to make sure that all who read this Gospel understand who the primary actor of the Gospel is, none other than God as witnessed to and embodied in the person of Jesus, God's beloved and divine Son. *God has invaded earth*, and the writer of the Gospel of Mark wants all who will pause for just a little while to read this story from beginning to end to know that, right from the beginning of the story; because to understand that God has torn open the veil that separates humanity from God and that God's Spirit has plummeted to earth much like a dive bombing bird intent upon being with its chicks is to understand the lengths to which God, through Jesus the Christ, will go to in claiming and redeeming all of creation.

So what of us here and now? What are we to learn about who we are in relation to God and Christ? Simply this; we are witnesses to God's action in the world. We, along with all of humanity, have been given the gift of God's love as it is embodied in the person of Jesus. Through our time together in worship and study we have been invited to travel along with Jesus as the Gospel narratives unfold and to witness through him how God intends for humanity to live. And as keepers of the story we are invited to do the same thing for those who will come after us; to proclaim in the most vivid and arresting way we know how the reality of God's love, God's care and God's desire to be in relationship with us and all as it has been and continues to be shown to us in the person of Jesus the Christ.

Friends, earth has been invaded because the heavens have been torn open and the Spirit of God has come upon us all. Thanks be to God for that.

Amen.

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