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# Jesus' Inauguration Day

Mark 1.4-11

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on January 11, 2009 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

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President Calvin Coolidge was known as a man of few words. They said he could be "silent in five languages." When Dorothy Parker heard in 1933 that Coolidge had just died, she inquired, "How could they tell?" Though he uttered few words, he made each one count. There's a story that a young woman said to him "Mr President, my Daddy bet me that if I could get more than two words out of you he'd buy me a gold watch." There was a long pause, after which President Coolidge, without looking at her, replied, "You lose."

Mark, the gospel writer, is also a man of few words. His account of Jesus' baptism is incredibly brief. It runs to only three verses. "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" That's it. Mark doesn't have any account of Jesus' birth. Matthew and Luke have a couple of chapters to get us used to who this special person is, and John has a sonorous prologue announcing Jesus as the word of God made flesh for us. But in Mark, this is Jesus' first appearance. This is his inauguration. And it's all over in no time.

Mark's gospel is made up of three stories. Each of the stories has its own surprises. Story One we could call the Messiah story. In this story Jesus is a person with awesome power, who can change the weather, feed the hungry, and heal the sick. But these powers are simply visual signs of his deeper power to free people from political oppression and spiritual bondage, to restore Israel to God's company and open out God's offer of friendship to all peoples. In the Messiah story Jesus takes on and defeats the evil powers and dazzles everyone from his disciples to the demons to rulers like Herod and Pilate. This is a conqueror who wins. The Messiah story reaches its climax on the road to Caesarea Philippi when Jesus asks Peter who people say he is and Peter says "You are the Messiah!" But the Messiah story has some surprises. It's a big surprise that Jesus comes from Nazareth, which roughly translates as Nowheresville, Tennessee. It's a mystery why Jesus repeatedly tells everyone to keep his true identity a secret. And it's curious that he takes so long to make his way to Jerusalem, where it seems the real action is always going to happen.

At just the point where the Messiah story reaches its climax, the road to Caesarea Philippi, Story Two begins in earnest. Story Two is the Suffering story, and it's about conflict – with the Jerusalem authorities, with the Romans, and with death. The surprise is that the Son of God isn't going to crush his adversaries – on the contrary, it seems they're going to crush him. The Son of God is going to be despised, rejected, and acquainted with grief. This is a tragic figure who loses. From time to time we get glimpses that this tradition of the suffering servant was indeed part of the Old Testament expectation of the Messiah, but it's clear that no one was taking bets on a suffering Messiah besides Jesus. We spend the whole gospel waiting to see if the disciples will ever be able to reconcile the two stories, the story of the conquering Messiah and the story of the suffering servant. They never do. The only person in the gospel who does is the centurion at the foot of the cross, who, the moment Jesus has just died a horrible death, announces "Truly, this was the Son of God."

But there is also Story Three. Story Three is the Cosmic story. It's the extra dimension in the gospel, which reveals that Jesus, initially celebrated and later brutally crushed, will nonetheless triumph over death and return in glory to judge, vindicate, and establish the reign of God. The Cosmic story shows Jesus as the one who is able to unlock the door between life and death, between heaven and earth, between humans and God. In the Transfiguration Jesus is not only the Story One Messiah who fulfils the hopes of Israel embodied in Moses and Elijah, he's the Story Three mysterious being to whom the voice speaks from heaven. At his trial Jesus is not only the suffering servant who endures the taunts of his oppressors, he is the returning judge who announces the Son of Man will return on the clouds of heaven.

The reason why I call Mark as terse as Calvin Coolidge is that he manages to squeeze all three of these stories into his three-verse account of Jesus' baptism. Most obvious is the Messiah story: Jesus is walking through water, which immediately reminds us of Moses crossing the Red Sea. Then we have John the Baptist, who reminds us of Elijah, another great figure of the Old Testament heritage Jesus as Messiah is being vested in.

Then we have the words “This is my Son,” which come from Psalm 2, a royal psalm, which makes us think of King David, like Moses another prototype of the conquering Jesus. So the Jordan baptism makes a fitting beginning for the Messiah story.

But already, just nine verses into the gospel, we have hints of Story Two, the suffering servant. When we hear the words “beloved son,” we’re reminded of the only time these words are used together in the Old Testament, which is in the story of Abraham setting out to sacrifice his son Isaac, and so we’re already thinking of tragedy and death. The phrase “in you I am well pleased” comes from the beginning of the servant songs of Isaiah, the very place where the language of suffering is introduced to the tradition surrounding the Messiah. And baptism itself is in some ways an act of death and resurrection, of drowning and being raised to life. So all in all there’s plenty of the Suffering story here in Jesus’ baptism.

And there’s even glimpses of the Cosmic story, even this early in the gospel. The mention of the dove, identified as the Holy Spirit, hovering over the waters of Jesus’ baptism, takes us all the way back to the first chapter of Genesis, where it says the Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters. So just as John’s prologue says “in the beginning was the word,” so Mark tells us what is going on at Jesus’ baptism is all of a piece with what was going on on the day of creation. That’s cosmic talk. And then the heaven opens and a voice speaks. That’s about as cosmic as it gets. Isaiah’s longing that God would tear open the heavens and come down is fulfilled in Jesus only one verse after he first appears in the gospel. That’s quick work.

So what we’ve seen is that Mark weaves together three stories of Jesus – the Messiah story, the Suffering story, and the Cosmic story – and they’re each going on pretty much all the time, and, brief as Mark’s description of Jesus’ baptism is, we’ve seen how they’re all very much going on at the same time right then. The trouble is, when we read the gospel, we tend to concentrate on whichever one is the story that suits us and overlook the other two. And so we have individual believers and congregations and even whole denominations that read the gospel as if it was all Jesus doing works of power and healing and overcoming evil and winning, or as if it was all Jesus suffering and being rejected and feeling abandoned and losing, or as if it was all about the world coming to an end and Jesus returning in glory. But in fact the gospel is all three, all intermingled with each other.

So many Christians talk of feeling closest to God during periods of distress and sadness. What they’re saying is that they’ve discovered the suffering story overlapping with the cosmic story. Many Christians find that it’s in doing the most obscure tasks in the power of the Spirit they feel most aware of God’s glory. They’re saying they’ve found deep connections between the cosmic story and parts of the Messiah story. And many Christians find that the best-laid and most prayerfully-considered plans often result in failure. What they’re discovering is an overlap between Story Two and Story One. The three stories were intermingled for Jesus, and they’re just as mixed up in one another today.

So we’ve seen that the Messiah story, the Suffering story, and the Cosmic story all overlap in the gospel, and all intermingle in Jesus’ baptism. Here’s my question for you. Why is it we assume only one of those stories ought to apply to us? Why is it we see these wonderful people who have today come for baptism, and we take for granted their stories should simply follow a Story One narrative? Why is it that almost every student begins a new semester assuming they should be having a Story One experience at Duke, and if they’re not there’s something terribly wrong because of course everyone else is? Here we are in this magnificent building, in this university that is heavy with success and bursting with achievement. Have we persuaded ourselves that we can just have the Messiah story and forget the other two? We assume our lives should be ones of success and happiness, and we see setbacks and suffering as stupid or irrelevant or unfair.

Trouble is, I don’t meet a whole lot of people whose story really is like that, even here at Duke. I meet people who are living Story Two, who feel despised, rejected, and acquainted with grief. But they know that we’re all expected to be living Story One all the time, so they become adept at tucking their struggles out of God’s gaze, hoping to hide them from God as successfully as they shield them from everyone else. Very often they imagine that the pain and grief in their life is irrelevant to God or even a sign of God’s displeasure with them. Why? Because we all assume the Messiah story is the only story, so if it *isn’t* the whole story and there’s no one to blame we end up blaming ourselves. But the gospel is telling us that these tapestries of distress are ways in which we can enter Story Two and grow closer to the suffering servant himself. And pretty much everyone I

meet has an inkling of the Cosmic story. They've had glimpses of glory. They've known moments in the eyes of a child or an aching sunrise or a gesture of forgiveness or a musical crescendo where words fail and they have only tears and silence and wonder and praise. But they haven't always realized that these moments constituted a story to rival the Messiah story, which still seems to have a stranglehold on our imaginations.

Mark's gospel is telling us, Jesus' baptism is telling us, that these three stories are interwoven in Jesus' life and interwoven in the heart of God. Why should they not be interwoven in your life too? And yet just as we tend to read only one story in the gospel, so we tend to read only one story in our own lives in just the same way. Usually it's the success story. In some cases it's the story of how much we've suffered or how much we long for something cosmic and dramatic from ourselves, from our love life or work life or family life, or from God. *But God is telling three stories at once, not just through Jesus, but through your life too.* Listen to the stories you find yourself reluctant to hear.

I started with an American president and I'm going to finish with one. Now I don't have the right and privilege of voting in presidential elections. I *do* have the duty and joy of paying taxes, you'll be reassured to know. I take my condition of taxation without representation to be an example of America's sense of humor at an Englishman's expense. I've often thought about pouring a glass of sweet iced tea into the Eno River in protest. But it hasn't escaped my attention that America is to inaugurate a new president in a few days' time. It's always foolish to make generalized observations about a country and culture, especially as a foreigner, but I can't help feeling America is rather inclined to see its presidents in a Story One perspective. I think the Messiah narrative runs very deep in America's view of itself. It's certainly very much in the air in relation to this particular new president.

But if we've discovered together in the story of Jesus' inauguration – Jesus' baptism – that the gospel interweaves three stories, the conquering story, the suffering story, and the glory story; and if we've discovered that all those three stories run through our own lives too, as we seek to follow in Jesus' steps; then it may do us well as we watch the inauguration of a new president who so many look to as a Messiah, that the conquering story was only one story among the three stories of Jesus, and that it may not be the most significant story of the years to come in this land. So many people long for this to be a Story One presidency; but the gospel includes suffering and rejection, and the gospel includes glorious transformation that comes, when we least expect, from God's hand and not from human hands.

To read the gospel, to walk the path of faith, and to be a good president, means not just to choose the story we like the best, but to discover that God is made known in Jesus through works of power and healing, through painful rejection and servant suffering, *and* through glorious and unexpected transformation. It's about meeting God in *all three stories*, not just one. My prayer is that, under this new president, we shall know what Jesus knew at his baptism: that we are all God's beloved children, that our suffering and the suffering of those we have afflicted is part of Jesus' story too, and that heaven is torn open for all to see the glory of God.