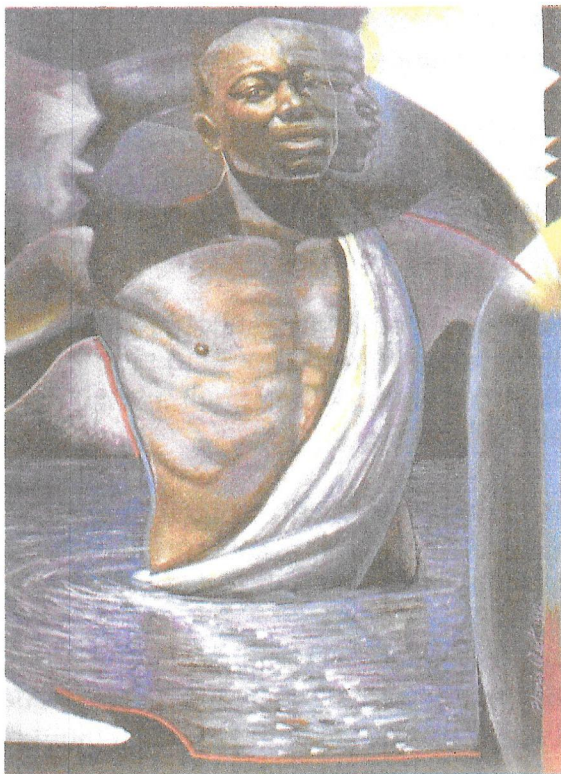


Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And 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. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He 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. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." 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."



The Baptism of Jesus by Pheoris West

"Defining Moments"

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they returned to their country by another way.

Matthew 2:12

In his commentary, 'Nine Miles Off', Hebrew scholar Walter Brueggemann wrote: The wise men story line and plot come from Isaiah 60, a poem recited to Jews in Jerusalem about 560 B.C.E. These Jews had been in exile in Iraq for a couple of generations and had come back to the bombed-out-city of Jerusalem. They were in despair. Who wants to live in a city where the towers are torn down and the economy has failed and nobody knows what to do about it? In the middle of the mess, an amazing poet invites his depressed discouraged contemporaries to look up, to hope and to expect everything to change. "Rise, shine, for your light has come." The poet anticipates that Jerusalem will become a beehive of productivity and prosperity, a new center of international trade. 'Nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn . . . Caravans loaded with trade goods will come from Asia and bring prosperity. This is cause for celebration. God has promised to make the city work effectively in peace, and a promise from God is very sure.' Like Matthew, the wise men know about Isaiah 60. They know they are to go to Jerusalem and to take rare spices, gold, and myrrh and frankincense. Most important, they know that they will find the new king of all peace and prosperity (Christian Century, Dec. 2001, p. 15).

What the wise men didn't know was that they were using the wrong text as their GPS guide. When God had spoken to the people in Jerusalem through Isaiah in 560 B.C.E., the city had failed to become a blessing for God. The appropriate text for the new thing that God was doing in Jesus as Prince of Peace came from the prophet Micah 5:2-1, "But you, O Bethlehem . . ." "Here, Micah's is the 'voice of a peasant hope for the future, a voice that is not impressed with high towers and great arenas, banks and urban achievements. It anticipates a different future, as yet unaccomplished, that will organize the peasant land in resistance to imperial threat. Micah anticipates a leader who will

bring peace to his people, not by great political ambition, but by attentiveness to the folks on the ground' (ibid). A leader who will do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6). The Wise Men's search for the King of the Jews was set within a dangerous political environment. It highlights the political wars that exist in every generation between two kinds of human communities: Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Jerusalem is the human community which seeks prestige, acquires wealth, and accumulates power through fear and harmful acts of terror. Bethlehem, on the other hand, is a human community of neighborly love in which the power of God is glorified through the establishment of non-violent, just relationships of compassionate care. 'But out of you O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people' (Mt. 2:4-6). Spoiler alert. After kneeling in silent adoration of the infant Jesus, the Wise Men chose the shepherd from Bethlehem to rule in their hearts.

... The heavens tore apart ...

Mark 1:10b

Unlike the serene, life defining moment of the Wise men, when Jesus was baptized by John, it was marked by a violent tearing apart of the heavens. Commenting on the use of the verb, "torn apart," Biblical scholar Douglas Hare wrote: "Mark may have selected this violent verb in order to point to God's invasion of a sinful world". Or Mark's choice may have been as Elton Brown pictured it: a "dive-bombing Holy Spirit" which filled Jesus with the power to protest injustice here on earth. Others surmise that "torn apart" may have been used to place Jesus in that long line of prophets, including Isaiah, who had prayed long before them, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down" (64:1). Or perhaps, the violent verb was used to point to a radical act. Rev. Kathryn Matthews wrote: Perhaps part of the drama of the scene is indeed that vivid character, John, who came preaching baptism and calling the people to repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This in itself was a radical act, because this fringe prophet had no standing and no business getting into the forgiveness of sins. The establishment had that covered: it was

their work, their right and their responsibility. When this troublemaker preached a baptism "for the forgiveness of sins" it was more dangerous than it sounds. Borg says that such a message countered the temple's claim to be the mediator of forgiveness. John was an anti-temple prophet and Jesus, by immersing himself in John's revolutionary movement of protest, claimed his priestly role, as mediator in the forgiveness of human sin.

And a voice came from heaven . . .

You are my son, my beloved, with you I am well pleased.

Mark 1:11

Being the Beloved constituted the core truth of Jesus' existence, and when we believe in that Beloved existence for ourselves,

'We are called to proclaim the truth . . . And let us believe. It is not true that this world and its people are doomed to die and to be lost. This is true: (Jesus said) I have come that they may have life in all its abundance.

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction. This is true: the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, the poor are hearing the good news.

It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction have come to stay forever. This is true: death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore.

It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world. This is true: The Lord whom we seek will suddenly come to the temple: and the Lord is like a refiner's fire.

It is not true that our dreams of liberation, of human dignity, are not meant for this earth and for this history. This is true: it is already time for us to wake from sleep. For the night is far gone, the day is at hand.'