

**Baptism of Our Lord**  
**Sunday, January 11, 2009**

[GOSPEL: Mark 1.4-11]

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."

9In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10And 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."

<sup>4</sup>ἐγένετο Ἰωάννης [ὁ] βαπτίζων ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ καὶ κηρύσσων βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεςιν ἁμαρτιῶν. <sup>5</sup>καὶ ἐξεπορεύετο πρὸς αὐτὸν πᾶσα ἡ Ἰουδαία χώρα καὶ οἱ Ἱεροσολυμίται πάντες, καὶ ἐβαπτίζοντο ὑπ' αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ Ἰορδάνῃ ποταμῷ ἔξομολογούμενοι τὰς ἁμαρτίας αὐτῶν. <sup>6</sup>καὶ ἦν ὁ Ἰωάννης ἐνδεδυμένος τρίχας καμήλου καὶ ζώνην δερματίνην περὶ τὴν ὀσφὺν αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἐσθίων ἀκρίδας καὶ μέλι ἄγριον. <sup>7</sup>καὶ ἐκήρυσσεν λέγων, Ἔρχεται ὁ ἰσχυρότερός μου ὀπίσω μου, οὗ οὐκ εἰμὶ ἰκανὸς κύψας λῦσαι τὸν ἱμάντα τῶν ὑποδημάτων αὐτοῦ: <sup>8</sup>ἐγὼ ἐβάπτισα ὑμᾶς ὕδατι, αὐτὸς δὲ βαπτίσει ὑμᾶς ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ. <sup>9</sup>Καὶ ἐγένετο ἐν ἐκείναις ταῖς ἡμέραις ἦλθεν Ἰησοῦς ἀπὸ Ναζαρετ τῆς Γαλιλαίας καὶ ἐβαπτίσθη εἰς τὸν Ἰορδάνην ὑπὸ Ἰωάννου. <sup>10</sup>καὶ εὐθὺς ἀναβαίνων ἐκ τοῦ ὕδατος εἶδεν σχιζομένους τοὺς οὐρανοὺς καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα ὡς περιστερὰν καταβαῖνον εἰς αὐτόν: <sup>11</sup>καὶ φωνὴ ἐγένετο ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν, Σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν σοὶ εὐδόκησα.

***The Welcoming Church, Part 1:How it begins***

*+ In nomine Domini. Amen.*

Beginning this Sunday and continuing for the next two Sundays, I am speaking with you about the Welcoming Church, what it means when we say we are open and affirming and welcoming of all people, what it means when we celebrate on January 25<sup>th</sup> what we proclaim each week in fact, that we are a Reconciling in Christ congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America ... and, not only what it means when we speak these words and proclaim these things, but why.

We will follow carefully the three Gospel readings appointed for these Sundays. Two are from the Gospel of Mark (remember that this is the Year of Mark in the three-year Lectionary of Readings) and one is from the Gospel of John.

This morning's Gospel gives us the story of Jesus' Baptism by John in the River Jordan, next Sunday we will read the story of Philip's invitation to Nathaniel (also known as Bartholomew) to follow Jesus, and on the last Sunday of January we will read the story of Jesus' invitation to Simon (known as Peter) and Andrew and James and John to become his followers.

So to review a bit right at the beginning, in these three weeks we have an kind of outline of what it means to be a welcoming, reconciling community of believers who follow Jesus – it begins with Baptism, it continues with a welcoming and reconciling invitation. In fact, beginning with the earliest followers of Jesus, what we call the Early Church and continuing right down to us, there is no other way that the church comes into existence, lives and grows than by this very understanding ... it begins with Baptism and continues with a welcoming and reconciling invitation. The three sermons I have planned explore how this is so and what it means for us, here in this congregation, this community of followers of Jesus, who have been baptized and who are called, asked, and expected to welcome others into this community of followers of Jesus.

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So we begin with the Baptism of Our Lord, as this Sunday is called in the Church Calendar, and we begin as Mark's Gospel does with that Story.

Mark doesn't fool around, it gets right into the matter ... and if you haven't read the Gospel of Mark for a while, here is how it begins:

Chapter 1, verse 1:

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

Verse 2:

*As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;*

Verse 3:

*the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" ';*

And then our Story this morning which comes next starting in Verse 4:

*John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*

Can you see, do you hear the way this Gospel puts it? There is no long introduction or genealogy, no stories of Jesus' birth as we read on Christmas, that will come in the much later gospels of Luke and Matthew.

Here, in this earliest document of the life of Jesus that we have in the Christian Scriptures (not the earliest document alone, because the Letters of Paul predate this Gospel by about 20 years, but the earliest document of the life of Jesus, called the Gospels from the very word that Mark uses in the very beginning of his story,

Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ

“The beginning of the *Good News* ... (εὐαγγελίου ... the word that becomes our word for *evangelism* ... (which means a “telling of the good news” or *evangelical* as in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America ... which means “a church that tells the good news” ... εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ... that is “the good news ... the word we have is *Gospel* from the Old English word God-spel ... the good news, the gospel of (meaning “about”) Jesus Christ.

That is where the *Gospels* get their name, the Gospels are the Stories of the Good News about Jesus Christ ... and not just for your reading pleasure ... but so that you may be welcomed into the community who follows Jesus Christ and tries to be like Jesus Christ and tries to do what Jesus Christ asked and we believe still does ask his followers to do, and not do what Jesus Christ does not ask his followers to do.

That’s all there (understood) in the first verse of the Gospel/the Good News of Jesus According to Mark.

And how does it begin? With his baptism, and that is the lovely story we have in front of us this morning.

If you were an early follower of Jesus living in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, listening to this story being read, and being a Jew of course, as was Jesus, and his first followers, you would not miss the subtle and not so subtle references in this story of his Baptism ... references to the Prophet Isaiah.

‘O that you would rend the heavens and come down!’ wrote the prophet (chapter 64) ... and in the 10<sup>th</sup> verse of our reading from Mark Jesus ‘saw the heavens rent open/torn apart.’ A very graphic image!

And in the very next verse, 11, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” ... the allusion to the 42<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Isaiah, “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.” And maybe even indeed there is a connection to the adoption formula employed at royal coronations and found in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Psalm, “You are my son; today I have made you my son/given birth to you”.

In other words, what Mark is telling us is this: Jesus is not an enigma, something strange and unusual and completely divorced from the story of God and God’s people, rather he is the one on the scene now in whom heaven and earth meet, where God and God’s creatures are joined together ... and the Gospel/Good News is the story of how this is woven and fleshed out and how we who *also* are baptized into Jesus shape ourselves around him, the one in whom God and God’s creatures are met.

When we say that we should live Godly lives, it is this that we mean ... we shape ourselves around the life of Jesus who is the one where God and we are met and meet and in fact meet each other ... and that last little part is the part where we find ourselves as the welcoming and reconciling *in Christ* ones who do everything that we can to live out this story.

That is what we call our *faith* ... faith is the living out of the story. It is making the story come to life in our midst and come to life in the world from our congregation.

When we live compassionate lives for each other, we live the story. When we work for peace and justice and love and understanding in the world, we live the story. When we uphold our neighbor and build up our neighbor and do not try to destroy and degrade our neighbor or make war upon him, we live the story. When we live lives that seek to repair the brokenness in the world and protect the earth upon which we live, we live the story.

Next week, we will explore just how a welcoming and reconciling community invites others into its gospel life and the living out of the story of faith.

*+ Deo Gratia. Amen.*  
*The Rev. Benjamin Larzelere III, Pastor*

**Second Sunday after Epiphany**  
**Sunday, January 18, 2009**

[GOSPEL: John 1.43-51]

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me."  
44Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 45Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." 46Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."

47When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" 48Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." 49Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" 50Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." 51And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

<sup>43</sup>Τῇ ἐπαύριον ἠθέλησεν ἐξελθεῖν εἰς τὴν Γαλιλαίαν, καὶ εὕρισκει Φίλιππον. καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς, Ἀκολούθει μοι. <sup>44</sup>ἦν δὲ ὁ Φίλιππος ἀπὸ Βηθσαιῖδα, ἐκ τῆς πόλεως Ἀνδρέου καὶ Πέτρου. <sup>45</sup>εὕρισκει Φίλιππος τὸν Ναθαναήλ καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ, Ὅν ἔγραψεν Μωϋσῆς ἐν τῷ νόμῳ καὶ οἱ προφῆται εὕρηκαμεν, Ἰησοῦν υἱὸν τοῦ Ἰωσήφ τὸν ἀπὸ Ναζαρέτ. <sup>46</sup>καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ Ναθαναήλ, Ἐκ Ναζαρέτ δύναται τι ἀγαθὸν εἶναι; λέγει αὐτῷ [ὁ] Φίλιππος, Ἔρχου καὶ ἴδε. <sup>47</sup>εἶδεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς τὸν Ναθαναήλ ἐρχόμενον πρὸς αὐτὸν καὶ λέγει περὶ αὐτοῦ, Ἴδε ἀληθῶς Ἰσραηλίτης ἐν ᾧ δόλος οὐκ ἔστιν. <sup>48</sup>λέγει αὐτῷ Ναθαναήλ, Πόθεν με γινώσκεις; ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ, Πρὸ τοῦ σε Φίλιππον φωνῆσαι ὄντα ὑπὸ τὴν συκῆν εἰδόν σε. <sup>49</sup>ἀπεκρίθη αὐτῷ Ναθαναήλ, Ραββί, σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, σὺ βασιλεὺς εἶ τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ. <sup>50</sup>ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ, Ὅτι εἶπόν σοι ὅτι εἰδόν σε ὑποκάτω τῆς συκῆς πιστεύεις; μείζω τούτων ὄψη. <sup>51</sup>καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ, Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ὄψεσθε τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀνεωγῆτα καὶ τοὺς ἀγγέλους τοῦ θεοῦ ἀναβαίνοντας καὶ καταβαίνοντας ἐπὶ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.

## ***The Welcoming Church, Part II: How It Continues***

+ *In nomine Domini. Amen.*

Today is the *Second Sunday after Epiphany*. It is also the *Feast of the Confession of St. Peter* – which is transferred to tomorrow, Monday, January 19 ... which itself is a national day of remembrance of *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, and a *National Day of Service* called for by our President Elect, a day when we are asked in howsoever it may happen to be intentional and spend some time seeking the care and compassionate concern of our neighbors.

It is also the beginning of the *Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*, an effort begun in 1908 at Graymoor in Garrison, New York by the Franciscan Friars and the Sisters of the Atonement who have been praying for “Christian Unity” ever since.

And it is the second week in a three-week series of sermons I am offering entitled *The Welcoming Church* which began last Sunday and will conclude next Sunday when we will celebrate *Reconciling in Christ Sunday* along with so many other welcoming congregations in our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

These sermons are based upon the three Gospel readings for these Sundays: last Sunday from the Gospel According to Mark, the earliest Gospel in our Christian Scriptures: the story of Jesus’ Baptism by John in the River Jordan somewhere south of the Sea of Galilee from which it flows, and somewhere north of the Dead Sea into which it flows; next Sunday, again from Mark’s account: we will have the story of Jesus’ invitation to Simon (known as Peter) and Andrew and James and John to become his followers, and this Sunday, from the Gospel According to John, the *latest* Gospel in our Christian Scriptures: the story of Philip’s invitation to Nathaniel (also known as Bartholomew) to follow Jesus.

Last Sunday’s Sermon on *The Welcoming Church* was entitled: *How It Begins*, and we spoke how Mark the Gospel Writer tells the story of Jesus’ life and ministry with immediacy and forthrightness, not with the embellishments of the later Gospels of Luke and Matthew, and not with the poetic hymns and expanded stories of the last Gospel John, but this way: Do you want to know the story about Jesus Christ, the Son of God? ... it begins this way: with his ritual washing in the Jordan River by John the Baptizer who was announcing to everyone that hope and change was coming into the world and now here it was in this person, Jesus of Nazareth, and it is in this person where heaven and earth meet each other, and where God and God’s creatures are joined together for the love of neighbor and the compassionate healing of the world.

And if you want to read that sermon in full, you can go online to our congregational website and click on Sermons and it will take you to the appropriate page ... or you can call me and I will give you a copy, or you can wait until next Sunday and you can have a copy of all three sermons.

So ... this morning, in front of us is the *end of the century* (that is, the 1<sup>st</sup> Century) *telling of the story of how the story of Jesus continues*. In other words, we have the story of

how it was that the person of Jesus and all that Jesus was and promised to be came to be something more than just a ritual washing of one person by another in the Jordan River. Just how was it, we want to know, that this idea of God and God's creatures meeting each other in the person of Jesus, how did this story continue so that we know about it?

And, the version of the beginning of that continuation we have this morning in this little story from John.

It begins "The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee." But if you haven't read the Gospel of John lately, and because in the Liturgy we have only a little window inside each Gospel each Sunday and not the whole writing laid open before us, you may ask ... well what happened the day before?

And in John's account what happens in the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter is this: there is that lovely Hymn to the Divine Word (the last time we read that was on Christmas morning), *In the beginning was the word ...* and that is followed by the announcement that the *word became flesh and lived among us ...* the statement of faith about the Divine Word, that this Word is born into humankind and grows up and matures and lives *among* humankind ... Then there is the insertion of a sentence or two as if John the Baptizer himself is speaking: *John testified to him and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me."* And then the opening part concludes with a statement that while no one has ever seen God, this Word become Flesh (notice that the name of Jesus is not mentioned at all in John's Gospel until the 29<sup>th</sup> verse) is baptized by John and that causes the religious authorities to ask John what he is up to ... asking him if he is the Messiah himself, or perhaps Elijah, or some Prophet ... to which he says (quoting the Prophet Isaiah), *I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness ...* and that causes his questioners to ask why he is baptizing, and John announces that he is doing this because one is coming who is much mightier than he is, and the next day John sees him and says *Ecce Agnus Dei (Behold the Lamb of God) ...* well, actually he didn't say it in Latin, nor did he say it in Greek, but it was written down in Greek and then translated into Latin (the Vulgate) and we repeat it every Sunday when we sing, "Lamb of God, You take away the Sin of the World, have mercy on us."

And the day after that, John is standing with two of his own followers and seeing Jesus walk by says it again, "Look, here is the Lamb of God." And those two turn around and follow Jesus and then he asks them what are they looking for, and he invites them into the house where he is staying and they become his first disciples, Simon (who is Peter) and his brother Andrew.

And now *the next day* after that, we have our story. Jesus decides to walk up to the Galilee and he invites Philip who was from the same village as Peter and Andrew to come along. Philip runs first to get his friend Nathaniel and tells him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathaniel almost spits on the ground as he says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" And Philip invites him to come and see.

But he doesn't.

Nathaniel is like a lot of people. The invitation is there, but why bother, it's too much effort. It's too whatever. I'd rather sit under my tree and vegetate.

Ah, but ... the *next* day Jesus sees Nathaniel up and walking about and coincidentally coming toward him and pronounces aloud, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!"

And Nathaniel stops and says to Jesus, "Oh really, how did you get to know me so well?"

And Jesus responds, "I saw you sitting under the tree before Philip invited you."

And that is enough to bring Nathaniel (who is also known as Barthomew, Bar Tolmai, son of Tolmai) into the group.

It's the Welcoming, don't you see? It's how the story continues. The Story does not continue without a welcoming invitation.

I have to say also that this little end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century story in John's telling of the Life and Ministry of Jesus is a bit abnormal. You would think, and this is the image that we get from our Sunday School Days, that Jesus would go around, pick out some followers, line them up, and then off we go to preach and heal and teach and love. But that is not the way it goes. It's not a fine-tuned slick-advertisement with wonderful sound-bites. And there is no interview.

Can you imagine what that would be like?

Jesus: You want to be a disciple?

Future Follower: Sure.

Jesus: OK. You're going to have to walk around a lot, meet a lot of sick people, rub shoulders with prostitutes and such, try to help them, be under constant scrutiny by the Roman Government, probably never have a retirement or pension, and watch me die and then try to make sense out of my living in your hearts and souls and stories, and then you'll have to tell this story and convince other people to join it, and ... by the way, you're going to die too.

Who would want to follow?

But that's not the way it went, and it's not the way it goes. There is the invitation, and the invitation is made not only by the Inviter, but by his followers.

*NOTE: As this is another ¾ Sermon (a sermon that is unfinished until it is preached), it ended differently at both services. What follows is one such ending as best I can recall.*

Sometimes in the Church we think that God and the Angels will come down and make our church grow, bring us new members, invite others into our fellowship, and so on.

But that is not the way it happens. The way it happens, the way it *continues* is that one person invites another person invites another person invites another person ...

Who does the inviting? **You** do the inviting. The story of how to do this is the story we read as our Gospel portion this morning. **You** invite others into the community of faith, into the life of this congregation, into the Story itself!

Next Sunday in the concluding Sermon of this Series, we will talk about what kind of followers are the followers of Jesus, just who *is* welcome.

*Continued next week.*

*+ Deo Gratia. Amen.*

*The Rev. Benjamin Larzelere III, Pastor*

### **Third Sunday after Epiphany Sunday, January 25, 2009**

[GOSPEL: Mark 1.14-20]

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

16As 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.

<sup>14</sup>Μετὰ δὲ τὸ παραδοθῆναι τὸν Ἰωάννην ἦλθεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἰς τὴν Γαλιλαίαν κηρύσσων τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ θεοῦ <sup>15</sup>καὶ λέγων ὅτι Πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς καὶ ἤγγικεν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ: μετανοεῖτε καὶ πιστεύετε ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ. <sup>16</sup>Καὶ παράγων παρὰ τὴν θάλασσαν τῆς Γαλιλαίας εἶδεν Σίμωνα καὶ Ἀνδρέαν τὸν ἀδελφὸν Σίμωνος ἀμφιβάλλοντας ἐν τῇ θαλάσῃ: ἦσαν γὰρ ἀλιεῖς. <sup>17</sup>καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς, Δεῦτε ὀπίσω μου, καὶ ποιήσω ὑμᾶς γενέσθαι ἀλιεῖς ἀνθρώπων. <sup>18</sup>καὶ εὐθὺς ἀφέντες τὰ δίκτυα ἠκολούθησαν αὐτῷ. <sup>19</sup>Καὶ προβάς ὀλίγον εἶδεν Ἰάκωβον τὸν τοῦ Ζεβεδαίου καὶ Ἰωάννην τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ, καὶ αὐτοὺς ἐν τῷ πλοίῳ καταρτίζοντας τὰ δίκτυα, <sup>20</sup>καὶ εὐθὺς ἐκάλεσεν αὐτούς. καὶ ἀφέντες τὸν πατέρα αὐτῶν Ζεβεδαιὸν ἐν τῷ πλοίῳ μετὰ τῶν μισθωτῶν ἀπῆλθον ὀπίσω αὐτοῦ.

### ***The Welcoming Church, Part III: How It Lives***

+ *In nomine Domini. Amen.*

[Note: the title of this sermon is changed; not ... *How It Grows*, but *How It Lives*]

The last time I saw the Greek myth *Orpheus and Eurydice* portrayed on stage it was in an off-Broadway production in New York City awhile back. It was a memorable production, in spite of the two women sitting next to us, one of whom slept through the tragedy with her head perched back upon her seat snoring at some rather odd moments in the dialogue.

So yesterday morning when we were fortunate enough to see by the magic of digital simulcast at the Lensic Theatre here in Santa Fe the delightful production of *Orpheo ed Euridice* from New York's Metropolitan Opera, I was prepared once again for the drama of the tragedy of love.

For as you know, Orpheus is given a chance to retrieve his dead wife descending through the Underworld but with one caution, he is forbidden to look at her as he leads her back to the land of the living and if he does, she will die a second time and this forever.

As I watched the opera unfold I found myself doing what I think all of us do when we read or hear or see this story ... urging Orpheus, "Don't look back, don't turn your head this time, bring Eurydice back to life."

And of course he does turn his head and looks at her, how could he not? And she dies again. What tragedy indeed.

Except that this opera was by Christoph Willibald Ritter von Gluck in the 1760s, and this composer of the early classical period changed how opera was being done. He changed the melodramatic style of opera that was in place for most of the century ... he created, that is a revolution, a new way of doing things, a new way of telling the story. So in this version of Orpheus and Eurydice things change from complex plots and music to a simplicity that captures the audience ... and in the end, because of Orpheus' deep love for his wife, Amor (flight-full goddess of Love) allows her to be revived a second time and both come back to the land of the living and all the happiness and joy that there can be.

And afterwards – because it was Saturday, the end of a long week for me of struggling with my announced Sermon Title for this Sunday – afterwards I thought to myself: *how very much like the Gospel ... and not just today's reading, but the whole Gospel, the entire story of Good News ... and how wonderful a thing especially on this particular Sunday that is Welcoming Sunday, Reconciling-in-Christ Sunday in our Church.*

Two Sundays ago, we read in the very beginning of the Gospel According to Mark about the Baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan River, this ritual act of washing ... a new beginning as a way of initiating a new understanding of the reign of God.

Last Sunday, we read in the very beginning of the Gospel According to John about the calling to discipleship: Philip speaks to Nathaniel, Nathaniel turns away in disbelief, Jesus speaks to

Nathaniel in such a way that Nathaniel knows this person knows everything about him, and he becomes a follower.

And now today, back in the beginning chapter of the Gospel of Mark, the story of the calling of Peter and James and John, fishermen, and the suggestion by Jesus that if they come along they will end up they will end up in a vocation that involves more than just casting their nets and gathering in the sardines and musht (the word means 'comb' ... a kind of tilapia, today called *St. Peter's Fish*) that inhabit the Sea of Galilee.

These three stories, I insist, are stories that woven together put forth something just as radical as the operatic change made by Gluck, where death is not the end of the story, but newness and fullness and love.

Let's put it another way, a simpler way ... here's how the Gospel Writers understood things as they tried to put into words the story about Jesus:

- here we are in a world that needs healing
- look around and see the brokenness, the people who are sick and suffering, the wars and violence that is taking place, the oppression of many by a few
- along comes one with a message of change, a humble person imbued with the presence of God, so powerful that he is able to bring along others, in time, many others into this journey of Good News for everyone
- as that takes place, things change, hearts are forgiven, people are reconciled, healing begins, life is restored, and new life springs up like flowers after the winter cold
- so, come along, all of you as well, follow this One into a life where you will love God, love your neighbor, and bring healing to the world (what in Hebrew is called *Tikun Olam* the 'repair' of the world).

Now you will note that nowhere in all this Gospel Story is there anything about individual salvation ... nowhere is there a religious effort to bring healing to only the individual ... nowhere is it all about Jesus alone ...

But always, in the Gospel Story, it is about the community ... Jesus *and* his followers ... the one who is healed who tells *others* ... Peter *and* James and John ...

You see far too often the Church itself has seemed like a monolithic (a single stone) of holiness. "Jesus is my personal Saviour" "Jesus lover of my soul" "I come to the garden *alone*" ...

They may be favourite sayings and hymns, but it's not the Gospel. Because the Gospel is always about inclusiveness with others, always. When the church says *you* it is always a plural. "The entire forgiveness of all *your* sins" means *the whole community together*.

When we come to Holy Communion ... it is not 100 private communions taking place around the Altar ... it is the community meal of love and forgiveness and reconciliation.

And far too often the monolithic holiness of the church has said ... “we have it, you don’t, listen to us, you might have a chance” ... a most un-Gospel, un-Jesus statement.

And to this the church has added over the years ... “by the way, if you are not heterosexual ... well, go join Eurydice ...” so fearful of sexuality has the people of God become over the centuries.

Well ... what the Gospel does, and it does it every week, every time we come into its presence, this Story of Jesus and the Good News that flows from him into a loving community that wants as its center the healing of others ... what the Gospel does is to not just challenge these monolithic thoughts and actions, but upset them, change them, reverse them.

It’s like Gluck’s invention ... Orpheus doesn’t just get to come back to the land of the living, so does his wife! They live (at least in the storytelling) ... they *live* together, and they’re happy.

Jesus doesn’t come along the edge of the shore and say to Peter and James and John, “Follow me and everything will be miserable.” No ... it’s just the opposite. “Follow me and I will show you how fishing means something more.”

And if you read on in Mark’s Gospel, as we shall in the next few weeks before the Season of the Sundays after Epiphany come to a close on February 22 with the Feast of the Transfiguration, right before Lent begins ... if you read on, what takes place in Mark’s Gospel right after the calling of these initial disciples into the community ... what follows is all kinds of chances, opportunities for healing ... next a man with an unclean spirit who is upsetting worship in the synagogue, then Peter’s mother-in-law who is sick in bed near death, then a whole squadron of sick and demon-filled people who run to Jesus and his group of followers begging for help.

Just like the church, you see ... just like the church is supposed to be. We’re baptized, we’re welcomed into the community, and we get to work ... right away.

Oh, and in case you were wondering, just who gets invited ... the Gospels tell us: everyone ... no distinction ... everyone one, anyone, all are welcome. There is no prerequisite for joining the community, just a desire to be here.

As a woman in this parish told me long ago on one particular Sunday ... “Pastor, I finally got it, the Eucharist is not a goal to achieve, but a gift to receive.”

There it is. Now on this Sunday of Welcoming and Reconciling, let us celebrate all that it means to open our arms and hearts and lives to others so that our community can be what Jesus wants it to be ... a fellowship of love and hope and forgiveness and life!

*+ Deo Gratia. Amen.*  
*The Rev. Benjamin Larzelere III, Pastor*