

“When God Tingles Your Ears”
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January 14, 2024
Baptism of Christ, MLK Remembrance

1 Samuel 3:1-11
Mark 1:4-11

Mark’s gospel has no Christmas story– at least, not the kind we are accustomed to. No surprising birth announcement, no unwed mother, no manger or stable, neither shepherds as in Luke nor magi as in Matthew attending the birth. For Mark, the birth story comes as Jesus is an adult. What matters to Mark is not that a baby is born with the spark of God within him. What matters is that this grown man receives the spark of God, in the moment of his baptism. To Mark, that is his Christmas story; that is the moment God came down to become incarnate in human flesh. John’s gospel’s idea of a Christmas story is to tell of Christ as the Word, which has existed since the beginning of time, and which acted as a co-creator with God.

Maybe you have your own story of how Christ was born into the world, or into your heart. But today, we will lean more into what Mark tells us about this holy moment, and hopefully, open our ears to other holy moments when God tingles our ears with something significant that we need to hear.

Mark invites us to experience several aspects of physical reality in his telling of the baptism of Jesus. First we have John the baptizer, who came from the wilderness– the same place where the Israelites had wandered for 40 years as they prepared for their life of freedom. John is clothed with camel’s hair, wears a leather belt around his waist, and eats bugs with honey; he eats unfarmed, uncultivated foods– John’s foods, like John himself, come from the wild. Before the time when Whole Foods was the dominant shopping experience for healthy eaters who didn’t mind spending extra money, in the Little Five Points neighborhood of my hometown, Atlanta, there was a natural foods co-op called Sevananda. As a co-op, they were customer owned and offered a different economic system than what is offered through corporations and the industrial agricultural complex. My dad and stepmom sometimes shopped there; you could find many things you’d never discover in an ordinary grocery, like the bee pollen my dad liked to scoop on top of his cereal. They had rows upon rows of bulk nuts, seeds, and beans. For many of the customers I passed there, you could smell them before you could see them– it may have been the spices of the foods they ate, or the fibers they wore, or the essential oils they wore in place of showering, and also likely the

herb they smoked. When I try to picture John the Baptist, in my imagination he looks like he would fit right in as a shopper at Sevananda. Sevananda is still there for those who don't want their eating habits tracked– or charged– by Amazon.

Then there is the Jordan river, where the baptism happens. When was the last time you stepped into a river, or knelt and scooped water from a river? I'm guessing most of you haven't waded into the mighty Hudson, but perhaps you have ventured out into a more humble river. How did the water feel? What was its temperature? How did it smell? How strong was the current? How did you anchor yourself against the water's flow? Can you stretch to imagine what the waters of the river felt like against Jesus' body? The Jordan is the same river that provided the boundary that the Hebrews crossed generations back, when they crossed from the wandering desert to the land of milk and honey. That Jesus' baptism happened there on that boundary brings together our human experiences of wandering, and fulfillment, our bondage, and our liberation.

In addition to what is happening in the river, and from John the Baptist, there is what is happening in the sky– the heavens are torn apart, and the Spirit descends like a dove. To the reader, this is a sign that God is ripping through the heavens to touch what is happening here on earth. The dove is a messenger of that truth, traveling from one realm to another– just as a dove was sent as a messenger in the time of Noah's ark that the flood was over. The heavens tearing apart as divinity comes down to earth is Mark's opening chapter, and later in the gospel when Jesus dies on the cross, the curtain in the Temple ripping as his divinity is surrendered back to the heavens helps to show us how God can break through to our world, but also leave it.

Finally, a voice: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well-pleased." It doesn't say whose voice it is, only that it comes from the heavens, so we can presume it comes from God. Whether Jesus alone heard this voice, or whether spectators watching heard it too, we can presume that anyone who heard that statement had tingling ears. This was a moment when the physical world and the spiritual world collide, and God breaks into not just Jesus' life, but all of our lives. *You are my child, the beloved. With you I am well-pleased.* Can you imagine those words tingling your ears?

I believe that God specifically chooses moments to move us in our lives with a word, a whisper, a wind, or with water. When he was just a child, God spoke to Samuel in the night– the first two times, Samuel assumed it was his mentor, the priest Eli, calling him from his sleep. I can only imagine how God's call, God's voice, must have sounded to Samuel; was it distant, like an echo in the night? Or was it close, warm, and wet like a whisper in your ear? Did the reality of it feel certain, until he was fully awake, as many

dreams feel until reality sets in? In the bible, dreams often serve as a vehicle to bring the holy into our human understanding.

And that's exactly what God wanted Samuel to do: bring the holy into human understanding. For generations, judges had ruled the twelve tribes of Israel. And yet, the people needed something more to remind them that God was near. God wanted to use Samuel as a prophet who would help bring that nearness to the people. "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle." God wanted to grab the people's attention, and the child Samuel was going to help God do that. The people weren't going to like everything that Samuel had to say—a tingle in the ears isn't always *enjoyable*; someone close to me struggles with tinnitus, and I know that in fact, a tingle in the ears can be a very heavy burden.

Ear-tingling is a way of preparing the way for what God is doing in the world. We know that Samuel did that. We know that John the Baptist did that, to get us ready for what Jesus did. But ear-tingling things didn't stop happening with Jesus' physical departure from the earth. The water that touched Jesus continues to touch us, and call us to take part in God's ear-tingling story of transformation. One modern prophet who helped bring that forth was The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. Just as Mark in his gospel told the story of the Spirit infusing human flesh in his account of Jesus' baptism, Dr. King also told stories of how the holy can enter our ordinary existence and call us to something better. He could illustrate the brutal oppression of racism and other injustices in ways that caught the attention and even called forth the repentance of people who had caused, benefited from, or simply ignored. But he would also call forth a vision of something better, something beautiful about what God's people can be and do if we live into that belovedness to which we are called, and see that in one another too.

The preacher Donna Schaper makes note that God told Samuel that God is about to do something that will cause both ears of anyone who hears of it to tingle. It wasn't just one ear—it was *both*. Maybe it means that one ear will tingle with fear, for the truth of what we have done wrong. But the other ear can tingle with hope, tingle with the dream of what we can do that is good and beloved.

As we take in the dangerous and fearful things happening in the world, these should tingle our ear. But our other ear? May it always tingle with the words said at Jesus' baptism, and also meant for us when we approach the water: *You are my child, my beloved. With you, I am well-pleased.* Let these words wash over us, tingle our ears, and call us to the beloved community God creates for us and through us.