

The waters of solidarity: Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:4-11

The baptism of Jesus is Mark's Christmas story.

by [Mary W. Anderson](#) in the [December 22, 1999](#) issue

After the hectic and holy Christmas season, after the unusual turning of a new century and, wonderfully, a new millennium, the church and the culture will settle back into familiar rhythms. For the church and its calendar, this means the season of Epiphany with its festivals of Magi, miracles, baptism and transfiguration. On the cultural calendar none of these celebratory times appears even as a footnote in the march of days. Between the Christian observances of Christmas and Ash Wednesday, the world knows only the festivals of Super Bowl, Martin Luther King Day, Presidents' Day and the next retail opportunity, Valentine's Day. The term "Epiphany" is an alien word in this our new century.

What of the gospel in this season? We begin this new time by reading the no-nonsense Gospel of Mark. There is no birth story to woo us into the good news. Mark begins with a full-grown Jesus meeting the grimy baptizer at the Jordan and going under the water in solidarity with those he came to save.

This is Mark's Christmas story, if we understand that story to be the one that proclaims the birth of God's new plan of salvation. In Luke 2, after Jesus comes through the birth waters, the angels proclaim, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom God is pleased." In Mark 1, God declares, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." God speaks words of pleasure over God's latest creation just as God spoke words of pleasure over each new item in the litany of creation way back in the genesis of all things. No matter how it's told--as a birthing narrative, as a baptismal narrative or as poetry--the facts of faith remain the same: Jesus has come among us and behold, a new day has dawned.

While our culture may know little of things epiphanal, it certainly has its collective ears perked up and its eyes open for signs of the times. We are still awestruck to be one of the few generations to witness the turning of a millennium. We know ourselves to be living in a new age, an impressive time filled with possibilities. In

Jesus we preach the arrival of a new era. It's the church's task to synchronize these two time pieces.

Back in the Middle Ages, when the Western world did orient itself around the church calendar, the people who knew the seasons and festivals of the faith were also people who were frightened by many things. Sin, death and the devil were perhaps the top three. The observant were terrified of the night and its creatures. Much happened that they did not understand. Modern enlightened men and women have conquered many fears. We are well informed. Science and technology keep improving our living.

And yet as we move into this new century, some old fears have crept in to raise the hairs on our necks. For all we have, for all we now know, for all we have accomplished, our sinfulness seems to keep getting the better of us. How can it be that for all our progress we are more terrified of violence by children than ever before? Why is it we now believe there are no safe places? Advances in computer technology, programs to build self-esteem, scientific leaps forward do not ultimately win the war against sin, death and the devil--just ask any teenager. It seems for all our power of positive thinking and self-help agendas, we cannot save ourselves or our world.

Jesus is baptized and calls us to follow him into the water to drown in it. When we were baptized into Christ Jesus, we were baptized into his death. We die to the old ways, the old ways that are not working and never have. Jesus shows us a still more excellent way.

One day in the summer of 1999, while I was serving as pastor in Evanston, Illinois, our community was stripped of its illusions of safety and harmonious diversity when Benjamin Smith brought his World Church of the Creator hatred to nearby streets. We were shaken to our core by the murder of one of our well-known African-American residents and the nearby shootings of Orthodox Jews and Asians. In the months afterward, hate literature was distributed in our neighborhoods and the threat of violence hung over us like a cloud. Citizens and people of faith were more eager to discover new ways of living together, and to respond to any call that might bring us together as Christians and Jews, African-Americans, Latinos and whites. We were anxious to die to the old ways that were not working. Though we boasted that our city was ethnically diverse, simply living in the same zip-code was not enough to create solidarity or peace.

When Jesus went down in the waters of the Jordan guided by John's rough hands, he did so in solidarity with sinners. Jesus' baptism was a demonstration of his obedience to God, a call he would soon be putting in the ear of all who wanted to follow him. This is the way it goes, Jesus said: Wash off the old dirt, shake the dust of sin from your feet. God has created a new day and a new way. Come walk with me out of darkness into the light of day. As a company of sinners went into the water, they fell in line behind Jesus and together walked toward Jerusalem. God looked at them and was very pleased.