

The God Who Is For Us

(Based on a Sermon by Jeff Krantz

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Scripture: Mark 1:4 - 11

Sermon:

There seems to be an "against" gene wired into us somewhere. No matter what it is that we experience in the world, we don't seem to be able to find an identity without deciding what it is that we're "against." We can't figure out who we are till we know who we're "not." As adolescents, we're against a lot of things, and proud of it. My two teenage daughters let me know what they're against at least once a week. As we grow up, the objects of our opposition change and we may become more subtle about it, but it doesn't go away.

What is sad is that the more carefully we align ourselves "against" something or someone, the more we make ourselves into the mirror image of that which we oppose. As peacemakers, this means that the more strongly we stand "against" war or violence, the more likely it is that we'll look into the mirror and see our enemy, with the sword gone only from the right hand to the left.

God offers us a different model in the story of the Baptism of Jesus today. God stands for us, not against tyranny. God stands with us, not against us. Although I'd read the story many times before, I hadn't fully appreciated how and why Mark identifies Jesus' Baptism and Passion so closely. But as I reflected upon the word "tearing" of the heavens in the beginning of Mark (1:10) and the "tearing" of the Temple curtain at the end (15:38) like book ends, with God's standing "for" rather than "against" in mind, the tie between the two events became clearer.

In both cases, God in Christ stands for us by submitting to us in our violence, refusing to be our violent double. I know that this is plain in the story of the Passion, and that it isn't as clear on the front end, but I think that the bookends are there nonetheless. All this rests on Mark's understanding of the Baptist. While the Church has made a saint of the Forerunner, Mark seems to take a dimmer view of his preaching. Indeed, John appears in the Gospel as the proclaimer of a gospel that Jesus refuses to incarnate.

John 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" (Mark 1:7-8). Mark tells us that all of Judea and Jerusalem went out to hear this message of the "one who is more powerful." While most of us would not disagree with the might of the One who accepted our violence without returning it, such was not the case in the day of John the Baptizer, or of Mark. We need only to look at the two messages and the responses they inspired. The Baptizer preached the Davidic warrior messiah, while the young man dressed in white in the empty tomb proclaimed the crucified and risen messiah. All of Judea went out to hear John, but the women who first witnessed the empty tomb and heard the young man "said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (16:8) and they ran away.

On the one hand: John's baptism of repentance was a baptism of preparation, preparing for the coming of the God who returned an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, violence for violence, who stood "against" all that is evil in us, all that leads us to oppress one another. John saw the coming "mighty one" as the mirror image of the god of Rome, the author of the *Pax Romana*, imposed at the end of the sword.

On the other hand: This is not the way of God, nor is it the way of Jesus. Jesus rejects John's notion of the Messiah, but Jesus did not stand "against" John at his baptism any more than he stood "against" Rome at Golgotha. Instead, Jesus submits to the baptism of John, the symbol of the God who mimics the world. He submits to a purification undesired by God, and in that event, the heavens are torn, and God declares, "You are my Son, the Beloved." So also, at the Cross, Jesus submits to the violence of humankind, the veil is torn, and we hear again, "Surely, this man was God's son."

God does not stand against us, or against John. God does not stand against us, or against the corrupt "powers" that crucified Jesus. God undoes them both, but through submission, through the surprising power of non-violent love.

This Feast of the Baptism of our Lord is one of the special times for doing baptisms. In Baptism we die to sin and rise to newness of life. We die to the compulsion to stand violently "against," which is the very essence of our sin. We die to it by repenting of it and submitting to baptism, and as we do the power of this violent compulsion in us and over us is torn.

We are not baptizing anyone this morning, so we'll renew baptismal vows once again. But before we do so, let's reflect for a moment about the times we stood against someone or something. (Pause) Perhaps we exchanged angry words or even blows. How did my "against" compulsion manifest itself? Now,... let it go.

Turn to Jesus instead and accept him, the one who submitted both to the baptism of John and the Cross for our sakes. Discover in the absence of your "against" compulsion the community that already exists between you and those with whom you disagree. And with Jesus as our model, we will discover and proclaim the dignity of every person -- at least until my "against" compulsion rears its ugly head again.

As with the proclamation of the young man at the tomb, this message may not fill the pews. It is much more popular to stand "against" the world than to be "for" it in all of its brokenness. Mark, however, and the Jesus of his Gospel,... they call us to proclaim the God who is "for" us.