

## Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Jan 6th 2018

This reflection will be posted soon. In the meantime, here is a reflection on this day in 2012 by Dennis Hamm, S.J.

Like all of the authors of the New Testament, Mark uses the language of the Old Testament to communicate the Good News of the Jesus the Messiah. The Scriptures of Israel provided the only language the early Christians had at hand to explain the meaning of Jesus of Nazareth, for themselves and for the rest of the world. The trouble is, most contemporary Christians don't know the Scriptures of Israel. As a result, what the Evangelists present in living color, most of us receive in black and white—and pale black and white at that. So let me try to supply some of the color of the Old Testament that Mark meant for us to receive in his words.

“I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the holy Spirit.” When his fellow Jews allowed John to dunk them in the waters of the Jordan River, they probably understood this as a way of signifying their recommitment to living the life spelled out by the laws of Moses, the covenant sealed at Mount Sinai. But how would they have understood the promise that the Mightier One would immerse them in the Holy Spirit? Their Scriptures would have prepared them to think of the divine promise in Joel 3:1—“Then afterward I will pour out my spirit upon all mankind.” In Joel's context that pointed to a time when the endowment of the Holy Spirit would be not just the inspiration of a particular king or prophet but a gift for everyone. Another promise that would likely have come to mind is the second half of Ezekiel 36, the promise made to the Judeans in the Babylonian Exile that the Lord God would bring them home to their land, cleansing them from their idolatry and giving them a new heart and placing his own Spirit with them, enabling them to live the covenant life to the full. (It takes the Acts of Apostles and the letters of Paul to spell out what this means.)

On coming out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. You could possibly read the reference to the heavens being torn open as a weather report or a description of how the sky looked that day, but it is far more likely that Mark is continuing his biblical allusions. The one Old Testament reference to the sky being ripped open is Isaiah 63:19, where the prophet prays urgently to God addressed as “father” (see verse 16), “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down.” In a passage where the Holy Spirit is already mentioned three times (verses 10, 11, 14) as needed for their guidance, this is a powerful plea for the same gift of the Spirit of God expressed in Ezekiel 36. Mark's assertion that the heavens were being torn open as Jesus entered his public life means that the prayer of Isaiah 63 is finally answered with the advent of Jesus.

There is more to unpack in the reference to the dove (new beginning, as in Genesis 8:11), and even more in Mark 1:11 (see Ps 2:7 and Isa 42:1), but this is enough for today's reflection. The dunking in the Holy Spirit and the tearing open of the sky remind us that the child born on Christmas really does bring us a renewal of life with God, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and an absolutely fresh start. Let's allow the Lord God to work this newness in our own lives as we move into this new year of the life of the Church.