

St. Paul's Anglican Church
2nd Sun Epiphany; Mark 1:1-11
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In his booklet, *The Lord is My Shepherd*, Pastor David Roper wrote, "Deep within us is a place for God. We were made for God and without his love we ache in loneliness and emptiness."

God loves us; and He has a plan to deliver us from affliction and to save us. In today's political, economic and moral dilemmas, it is easy to forget this fact. We are suffering through the longest government shutdown in our history (even one day is too long) because our two main parties would rather "fix the blame" rather than fix the problem. Many of us are doing okay economically while others are just getting by; and there are too many people living in poverty. Society tells us things that once were morally wrong are now perfectly acceptable.

These conditions even exist within our Lord's greater Church; the Protestant Reformation of the 1500's is still alive and well in some local churches as the debate between the more Catholic and Protestant beliefs continues. In fact, in a book I am reading, the author, who is a pastor, asks, "Why do some churches have priests?" and "Why are Christians behind the movement to post the Ten Commandments in class rooms and courthouses?" He admits he is criticizing denominations on both sides and in the middle of the Reformation aisle. (In fairness to the author, who I respect and admire, I will reserve my opinion of this book until I complete its reading.)

But God has a plan. Over 4000 years ago, He told an old guy named Abraham, that He would be the father of a great nation, and through his descendant, all the nations of the world would be blessed. God chose Abraham because of his great faith. About 650 years later, we find another old guy of faith who is a main character in God's plan. It is Moses coming down from mount

Sinai; and this is where we find him in our Old Testament reading (Ex. 34:29-35).

When Moses came down from mount Sinai with the two tables of testimony, he did not know that the skin of his face shone. While Moses was in the presence of God, receiving the Ten Commandments, his face began to shine as a reflection of the glory of God. His brother Aaron, who was the Jewish High Priest, and all the congregation were afraid to go near him. They knew he had been communing with God, and they could tell that something awesome and godly had occurred, but they were afraid.

The Ten Commandments still tell us how God would like us to live (that is why we should post them in our court houses), but they cannot deliver us from affliction or save us; they only bring our faults to our attention.

Moses was the intermediary through whom God presented the commandments and he was a key participant in God's plan, but he is not the descendant through whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed. However, he did prophesy about that greater descendant.

As we move forward again, this time almost 1500 years, we reach the time of the gospel reading (Mark 1:1-11). The descendant of Abraham through whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed is identified in the first phrase of Mark's gospel: **the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.** In our gospel reading a much younger prophet, John the Baptist, introduces Jesus and announces his earthly ministry.

As in the case with Jesus, John the Baptist's ministry was foretold by ancient prophecy. Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 are quoted in our reading and they tell us God will send his **messenger** to announce and **prepare the way** for his Son, the Savior of the world. As part of this announcing and preparing, John preached to all people **the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.** Seeking forgiveness for our sins is always the best way to prepare to be in the presence of our Savior, but John's baptism in the

Jordan river did not have the power to bring lasting change. John did not have that authority, but he knew someone who did.

Even though many people came to John seeking forgiveness, he put his mission in the proper perspective when he said, **There comes one mightier than I after me. I indeed have baptized you with water, but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost.** Only God can send the Holy Spirit to us; only God can cause Him to live within us. Through faith in our Savior we receive the Holy Spirit, and God's plan to deliver us from affliction and save us becomes real. Jesus Christ, through his baptism with the Holy Spirit, does have the power and the authority to bring lasting and positive change in this life, and with certainty, for all of eternity.

Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan and coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. We consider this to be the moment Jesus became fully aware of his divine mission and his unique relationship with God the Father. John said Jesus baptizes with the Holy Ghost, so when we were baptized the Holy Spirit descended upon us. Jesus became aware of his mission through the Holy Spirit; through our baptism we receive gifts from the same Spirit that we are to use in our mission, in our ministry (we all have one!).

The gifts we receive are outlined by Paul in our epistle reading (Romans 12:6-16a); they include the gift of preaching, ministering to others, teaching, advising, giving, governing and showing mercy. But whatever our individual gifts may be, they are worthless if we do not use them to serve God; and we gain no spiritual benefit if we use them reluctantly. Paul said, **Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honor preferring one another.** In our personal ministries, we must first consider the needs of others; we must use our gifts from the Spirit in the spirit of love.

But, no matter how many spiritual gifts we receive and use correctly, we still live in chaotic times; and when we look back in history, we see different circumstances, but we still see chaos.

And I would imagine if we could clearly see the future, we would quickly recognize it will have its own examples of chaos and confusion. So, what do we do?

Knute Rockne was the head coach of the Notre Dame football team from 1918 until he died tragically in a plane crash in March, 1931. During this time his teams won 105 games, lost only 12, and had 5 ties. Because of his record, innovation and his ability to motivate his players, he is widely recognized as one of the greatest college football coaches of all time.

But he was also a Christian having been baptized during his coaching career. He encouraged the young men he coached and recruited to live right; because of his fame, they listened and learned from him. When he travelled, he always took his rosary and his prayer book; and when he died, both of them were found close to him in the wreckage.

This is what he said about prayer in football. “I’ve found that prayer works best when you have big players.” (Knute had a great faith and a weird sense of humor.) I know his comment is not what you expected, but think about it. When we pray, we are reaching out to the biggest of all Players; we are praising, thanking, seeking our Savior.

In the midst of our chaos, God still has a plan; and He is big enough to make it happen. Our gifts cannot save us but we can use them to work to change what God would have us change; and we can, and must use our faith to survive and spiritually prosper in the midst of what we cannot change!

Remember this, St. Paul said we have gifts from God, but by far the greatest gift is knowing that through his love and grace, and our faith in his Son, we have an everlasting part in God’s eternal plan for salvation.

Now unto God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, be ascribed all might, majesty, power, dominion and glory, both now and evermore. Amen.

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

