

Knowing the Secret

Rev. Edward C. Horne

United Methodist Church of Westport and Weston

January 8, 2012
Epiphany I – Baptism of Jesus

Isaiah 42:1-9
Mark 1:4-11

One of the decisions every good storyteller must make is when to divulge the story's secret to the reader. Mystery writers often hold back the "Whodunit" until the last chapter, keeping us turning the pages to discover who it was who poisoned Lady Bennington or pushed Uncle Smydlie off the cliff.

In some stories, though, the writer reveals the secret right at the start. We know the truth before most of the characters do and the tension mounts as we watch them gradually discover the hidden knowledge we already possess.

There is a legendary tale in Princeton, New Jersey, about Albert Einstein and a case of wrongful identity. The story goes that Professor Einstein was walking past a local inn on his way to the university and was mistaken for a bellhop by a wealthy woman who had just pulled up in a big sedan. The woman gets out of her car and summarily orders Einstein to carry her luggage into the hotel. Without saying a word, Einstein pauses, picks up the woman's bags, delivers them into the hotel lobby, and then continues on to his office to ponder the mysteries of the universe.

True or not, the fun of the tale lies precisely in our knowing the secret the woman does not know. This strange-looking, ruffled little man is the most celebrated intellect of our time. We savor the moment she realizes that she has just had *Time* magazine's "Person of the Century" lug her bags!

The Gospel of Mark is a story where we know the secret from the beginning. The secret? The identity of Jesus Christ. Who is this man so many people are talking about? This teacher and healer? None other than the Son of God.

Mark lifts the veil for us in his opening episode, when Jesus is baptized by John. Coming up out of the Jordan River, Jesus sees the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove from the heavens and hears the voice of God with a message meant specifically for him: "You are my Son, my Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

One of the subtle things about this story is that Mark tells his version slightly differently from the other gospels. Matthew and Luke make this a public event---the people around Jesus see and hear what he sees and hears. In Mark alone only Jesus sees the dove; only Jesus hears the voice. It is a profoundly personal moment, what one commentator calls,

“a secret epiphany.”

God knows the secret. Jesus knows the secret. Now we know the secret, too. That is especially meaningful to Mark, since Jesus keeps his identity hidden from most people. The story unfolds and no one seems able to discover the secret. The authorities mistake him for a trouble-maker. The people confuse him with a prophet. Even his disciples are blind most of the time to who he truly is.

But don't be too hard on these folks. He doesn't look like the Son of God, after all. Like the genius Einstein dragging suitcases up the steps of a hotel, Jesus does not appear to be who he is. He eats with the wrong people. He publicly acknowledges women. He heals on the Sabbath. And, maybe worst of all, he suffers.

That is the reason Mark tells us the secret in the beginning. He wants us to know that Jesus is the Chosen One even when all hell breaks loose on Good Friday. No reasonable person who takes one look at this pathetic Galilean dragging the luggage of the world up the slopes of Calvary could possibly say, “This is God's Son.”

When the sky turns black and the temple curtain is torn in two, Mark wants us to remember back to the day when the skies opened and a voice spoke from heaven, “You are my Beloved Son”---the secret revealed in Jesus' baptism.

And Mark wants us to remember that we are baptized, too.

To the naked eye, nothing changes much at baptism. A baby is still a baby, maybe a little wetter after coming to the font. It's just that whenever the sign of the cross is made on anyone's brow, whether down at the river or in church, they are marked as Christ's own. They belong to God.

The presence of this invisible marker also means that God can speak to us at any time. We can have deep experiences of the holy at anywhere: When we're alone, walking in the woods or deep in prayer---or, as George Hanze mentioned at Bible Study, when we're taking out the trash or picking up the paper---and something hits us, an insight or an idea, and things all seem to make sense. Our own secret epiphany.

Or, like Jesus at the Jordan, God can speak to us when we're in the midst of a crowd. We can be vigorously singing a hymn or silently sitting in our pew when, without warning, the Holy Spirit lights upon us like a dove to tell us that we are God's beloved.

These spiritual experiences are always the earth-shaking, soul-shattering events that they are often pictured to be. When Mark says that the heavens opened at the baptism, it doesn't mean Jesus saw a door flung open in the sky and floods of light streaming down to him. Heaven is not up there in the great beyond but is really dimension behind our ordinary reality. It's more as though an invisible curtain, right in front of us, was

suddenly pulled back, so that instead of the trees and the flowers and the buildings we find ourselves, however fleetingly, standing in the presence of another reality altogether.

Tom Wright says about these moments, “A great deal of Christian faith is learning to live by this different reality even when we can’t see it.” Sometimes the curtain is pulled back and we can sense what’s going on in God’s reality. Most of the time, we walk by faith, not by sight. But those moments of insight make the rest of our faith lives possible.

This is one of the things Mark is saying to us: Look at Jesus and learn to see the secret presence of God in your life. That would be a wonderful resolution to make in this New Year: discovering the hidden heavenly dimension of God’s world which is right next to our own.

In January we’re focusing a lot of attention on flourishing—what gives us joy, makes us happy, fills our spirits. In a world that so often mistakes us for who we truly are, that mis-reads us or dis-places us, it is greatly comforting to realize that God knows who we are. God says to us the same thing he said to Jesus on his baptism day: “You are my beloved child; with you I am well-pleased.”

It may seem impossible, especially to some folks who never heard those words from their earthly parents, but it’s worth repeating them over and over again. “You are my dear, dear child. I am delighted with you.” Try saying the words slowly to yourself, with your own name attached to them, and see if you begin to start feeling filled up.

Of course, God loves us too much to leave it at that. God calls us to carry some of the world’s baggage, too. In this season when we celebrate the Epiphany, the coming of the Light, we are asked to be light-bearers rather than darkness-cursers. To say to the forces of violence, destruction, and hate: I beg to differ.

Baptism is the invisible stamp of Christ upon us. Someone greater than us has named us and claimed us and wants the very best for us with only one good reason in mind---so that he might love us for all eternity.

That is a secret I hope we will never forget.