

January 10, Baptism B (Mark 1:4-11)

Readers of Mark's Gospel know that a divine fragmentation could happen at any time.

by [Angela N. Parker](#) in the [December 30, 2020](#) issue

I think that I always wait with bated breath, hoping that folks who institute harm will come to some kind of justice. I waited with bated breath for the verdict when George Zimmerman was tried for the killing of Trayvon Martin, and I waited with bated breath to see if Darren Wilson would be indicted for the killing of Michael Brown. I waited with bated breath to see if any of the police officers who fired shots that killed Breonna Taylor would face any charges. No one has paid for taking any of these Black lives. If I held my breath any longer, I would pass out from lack of oxygen.

Why am I thinking about Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Breonna Taylor? I think that when those of us from communities who know that our lives do not matter no longer hold hope for the “center” to take our lives seriously, we realize that we must get away from that center. I argue that this week’s passage from Mark shows people doing exactly that.

Mark’s Gospel begins by highlighting that he is writing about the gospel of Jesus the Christ (an imperial statement in itself). Then the Gospel writer cites Isaiah but in fact provides an amalgamation of Exodus, Malachi, and Isaiah. “I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me,” he writes, quoting Malachi.

In this week’s reading, John the Baptist has summoned and called folk from Jerusalem, the countryside, and the entire region out to the Jordan River to be baptized by him. It’s striking to read that “all” of the folks of the countryside of Judea and even all of the city inhabitants of Jerusalem come out to be baptized by John. There is a juxtaposition between the city folk and the country folk leaving their centers and going to the margins of the Jordan River to be baptized.

I cannot overstate the significance of Jerusalem. As a biblical scholar, I learned early that Jerusalem is always the place the Israelites “go up” to, no matter whether they are traveling to the city from the north or the south. One always goes up to Jerusalem, almost signifying a going up to God. There is great meaning in the Gospel writer highlighting that all of Jerusalem is leaving to go to the Jordan River. Is there something wrong at the center, in Jerusalem?

I think the answer stems from what the people are doing as they go out to be baptized. They are confessing their sins. Why could they not confess their sins in Jerusalem, which is the center of traditional, institutional temple worship? The Gospel writer is setting the scene for what we know comes later: the showdown between Jesus and the center. In Mark’s Gospel there is a showdown between the center of synagogue and temple worship and the meaning of walking in the way of Jesus the Christ.

And with such a stage having been set, the reader of Mark’s Gospel should expect a divine fragmentation at any time. Indeed, this moment occurs at 1:10, where the Gospel writer describes “the tearing of the heavens” and the “spirit as a dove descending” onto Jesus as he comes out of the water. While interpreters cannot definitively assert whether everyone around Jesus sees the tearing of the heavens or hears the voice of God, there is no mistake, according to the Gospel writer, that a divine fragmentation occurs in that moment.

So what does Mark’s divine fragmentation mean for us today? I believe that for those of us who have waited with bated breath for the confession and removal of the sins of institutional racism, Mark’s divine fragmentation gives hope that oftentimes justice does not come from the center. Instead it might come when many leave the center, take to the streets, and gather together for confession and the revelation of the divine fragmentation.

In the Breonna Taylor case, justice still has not come from the center. Kentucky attorney general Daniel Cameron represents the center, and he recently sought to seal the grand jury records even as a judge ordered records released so residents of Kentucky could know if “publicly elected officials are being honest.” Only after mass protest and continued pressure from constituents across the city and the countryside can God’s divine fragmentation begin.