

*Sermons at*  
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)  
Reggie Denton, Pastor

January 7, 2024 (Baptism of Our Lord, Year B)  
Mark 1:4-11

I want to tell you a story about a woman name Elsie Dewitt. Elsie was UPSET when she came into the sanctuary. She wasn't able to sit in HER place in the middle of her usual pew. The Murphy's usually SAVED it for her, but they were out of town today, and now there were several VISITORS in their row. Elsie had to sit at the END of the pew, next to the center aisle. She was upset, but she had a good REASON. That was where her late HUSBAND had always sat. She felt WRONG sitting in HIS SEAT.

But that wasn't the ONLY reason she was upset. It was the second Sunday of the month, baptism Sunday, the Sunday HER congregation set ASIDE for baptisms. She could see the family with the baby sitting near the front, not far from the baptismal font. No doubt the visitors in her pew were RELATIVES of the family.

Elsie had to FORCE herself to come to church on baptism Sundays. She came partly because she didn't know how to EXPLAIN to her friends why she DIDN'T WANT to come, but mostly because she could never justify NOT going to worship. Elsie ALWAYS went to worship on Sunday. She wouldn't miss for ANY reason. Any OTHER Sunday she would have been GLAD to have been there. Worship was a JOY for her. She had NEVER thought of it as an obligation. But baptism Sundays were DIFFERENT. They were something she SUFFERED, like one might endure the occasional migraine headache.

The REASON was a SECRET, a secret that she had shared with NO ONE, NOT even her late husband. Her PARENTS had known, of course, but they were long gone.

Then it happened. Her discomfort grew to PANIC, near TERROR. At the end of the baptismal liturgy, the pastor was headed her way, carrying the baby she had just baptized. It was a custom in that church for the pastor to give the baptized baby to someone in the congregation to HOLD during the baptismal prayer, as a way of welcoming him or her into the family of God. "OH NO!" Elsie thought, as the pastor smiled at her and handed HER the baby. One of her GREATEST FEARS had been realized. NOW what was she going to do? She couldn't just hand the baby BACK to the pastor and ask her to give him to someone else. The child deserved BETTER than that on this IMPORTANT day. But it wasn't right, it JUST WASN'T RIGHT! If the others knew her SECRET, they would know that she had no BUSINESS holding the child during a SACRAMENT.

Elsie bit her lip and hung on to the baby, trying HARD not to let her discomfort show. She breathed a sigh of RELIEF when, at LAST, the pastor finished the prayer and took the baby back to his parents. The worst was over. But she was still so troubled by it all, that when people stood for the next hymn, Elsie quietly slipped out of church. She LEFT before the service ended.

That afternoon, Elsie called the pastor, and asked if she could see her at her earliest convenience. She was determined to RELIEVE herself of the BURDEN of the TERRIBLE SECRET she had carried alone for all of these years. Elsie knew that if she DIDN'T share it NOW, she would carry it WITH her into eternity.

Pastor Carol agreed to see her at two o'clock the next afternoon. Elsie arrived promptly at the appointed hour. She looked pale, and her eyes were swollen and red. "I couldn't sleep at all last night," she told Pastor Carol. "I've been DEEPLY TROUBLED ever since the baptism yesterday. You may have noticed that I left the service early."

"I DID see you go," Pastor Carol said, "and I'm glad you've come to talk about it."

"I'll have to start at the very beginning," Elsie said. And then she poured it all out. "I had a child out of wedlock when I was SIXTEEN. My folks kept me home from SCHOOL as soon as they found

out I was expecting. Dad simply told the teacher that I was needed on the farm. In those days, that was a common occurrence, so no one thought anything about it. And no one ever FOUND OUT about the baby. My mother assisted me in the delivery. That went well enough, but the baby was small, and he had difficulty breathing from the first day. I KNEW I should have sent for the pastor and had him BAPTIZED, but I was afraid of what he might SAY. So we NEVER sent for him. The baby, I had named him EDWARD, he DIED TWO WEEKS after he was born. We buried him in the family cemetery on the ridge behind the house. I told my HUSBAND about the baby before we were married, but I have never been able to tell ANYONE, not even my HUSBAND, about my FAILURE to have him BAPTIZED. I've tried to put it out of my mind, but every time I SEE a baby baptized in CHURCH, I REMEMBER, and I wonder if MY baby is all right. I can't IMAGINE that God would keep him OUT of heaven, just because he hadn't been BAPTIZED ... but I don't KNOW. I worry about it, and even MORE now that I'm OLDER."

Then Elsie broke down and wept. Pastor Carol got up, put her arms around her, and held her for a long time. Finally, Pastor Carol asked Elsie if she would trust her. Elsie said "Yes," and together she and Pastor Carol made some plans.

The next Sunday morning Pastor Carol preached on the baptism of Jesus from Mark's gospel. She emphasized how Mark CHOSE his words CAREFULLY when he said that Jesus saw "the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending on him like a dove." Jesus didn't just see the HEAVENS OPEN; he saw them "TORN APART." This was DRAMATIC! God needed to BREAK into our world in a BIG way! That's what it was going to TAKE to break into our LIVES and get THROUGH to us.

Through to us about WHAT? Pastor Carol preached that God needed to get through to us WHO GOD IS. God is LOVE. We human beings, God's precious children, KEEP TRYING to MAKE God into someone and some-THING ELSE, something BESIDES love.

And our RELIGION is the WORST of it. Our RELIGION is what most often plugs our ears and covers our eyes to WHO God REALLY IS. That's why in Mark's Gospel, the only OTHER place that he chooses to use the words "torn apart" was at the END, where it says: "Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the CURTAIN of the temple was TORN in two, from top to bottom" (Mark 15:37-38). The curtain, that SEPARATED the REST of the temple from the HOLY OF HOLIES, where GOD was THOUGHT to LIVE, was TORN APART. God needed to BREAK THROUGH our RELIGION so we could SEE WHO GOD IS.

And Pastor Carol proceeded to give EXAMPLES, examples of HOW our religion keeps leading us to know a DIFFERENT God than the God of UNCONDITIONAL LOVE, who Jesus came to SHOW us. She CAREFULLY AVOIDED the example of REQUIRING BAPTISM SO STRICTLY that a GRIEVING MOTHER would WONDER WHAT HAPPENED to her BABY who WASN'T baptized, but she hoped that Elsie would UNDERSTAND that God is LOVE. Would God have ABANDONED her little Edward because she had FAILED to BAPTIZE him? NO! Of COURSE not! Pastor Carol AVOIDED THAT example of how our religion gets in the way, but she gave MANY OTHERS.

Then, after she said "Amen" to her sermon, Pastor Carol announced that Elsie had something she wanted to SHARE with everyone. Elsie got up from where she was sitting, in her USUAL seat, walked HESITANTLY ALL the way up the aisle, and then turned to the congregation, RIGHT in FRONT of the BAPTISMAL FONT. Elsie took a deep breath, and then she TOLD them the WHOLE STORY, JUST as she had related it in the pastor's office.

When she was finished, Pastor Carol took the cover off the baptismal font and invited EVERYONE in the congregation to join hands as they prayed. And then, calling Elsie's long-lost child by name, she commended Edward to God, who Elsie now KNEW had been HOLDING her baby FOR her, ALL those years.

When the prayer was finished, Pastor Carol invited the congregation to come forward and dip their hands into the water and remember THEIR baptisms. They all came.

Elsie was the LAST to come. Her hands trembled as she lifted them up out of the water.

And somewhere, from deep INSIDE herself, she heard a VOICE;

a voice BREAKING THROUGH the LIFETIME of SHAME she had born;  
a voice SAYING that ALL was WELL,  
a voice from HEAVEN, saying: "ELSIE, YOU are my beloved child. With YOU I am well  
pleased."  
Amen.