

“Tearing Apart the Heavens”

January 10, 2021

Good News for a New Year series – Baptism of the Lord – Livestream

Some of you know that I'm dealing with a broken arm. I've been thinking a lot about brokenness and healing. I've been thinking a lot about what healing requires. For me this week it meant going to a specialist and hearing and heeding his advice. I can't use my left (and dominant) hand - not even for the smallest things. I have to be patient in healing. I go back this week to make sure that it's healing well and that I don't need surgery. I wear this cast that keeps my arm immobilized. I keep my arm in a sling during the day and propped up at night. I have to ask for help for some simple tasks and receive help graciously.

All of it's a part of healing. For healing to happen, I needed the doctor to tell me the truth - and I have to listen. Was it hard? A little, but not surprising. If I don't listen, then there will be more things to deal with, maybe surgery will be more likely, and recovery will take longer.

So beyond my own healing, I've thought a lot about what healing requires on a larger scale. After what happened on Wednesday in Washington, D.C. on Epiphany, I've prayed to God who alone can bring order out of chaos. Some say it was predictable, and I've bounced from anger to sadness and all around for what's ahead. It was disturbing and distressing to see Christian symbols and flags storming into the Capitol building. None of that was the way of Jesus, and I believe God grieves the unholy alliance between those who would claim to follow Jesus and espouse white supremacy or white nationalism or racism – coupled with violence, hate, destruction, extremism, misinformation. It is not okay.

I've prayed for peace. I've struggled with the double standards when it comes to how protestors and rioters are treated, especially when it comes to skin color, and struggled to own my own privilege. I've prayed for justice. I've placed a lot of blame on leaders only to be reminded that I have to search my heart, too. I've prayed for Jesus to come soon and very soon. Tear open the heavens and come down! I've considered my own role as a leader and how words matter and how actions have consequences. I've prayed for a peaceful transfer of power after a free and fair election.

It all comes to bear today as we're living into this season after Epiphany. It stares us right in the face as we come to the water and hear John telling us the truth – repent of your sin, get ready for the Lord. It all comes to bear as we remember that Jesus came to the water - not because he needed to be forgiven of sin - but because he was

reminding us what it means to be bathed in God's grace, remember who we are, and who God calls us to be - to be a part of God's Kingdom work.

If you're reading along in the Gospel of Mark, you've noticed by now that Mark doesn't give us anything about the nativity story. We don't ever read Mark during Christmastime because there's nothing there – no Mary or Joseph, no angels, no shepherds or magi. Mark starts with John the Baptist and Jesus as adults at the river and just keeps going. **HOW SLIDE:** meme about four Gospels

Today we start a new series focused in Mark about GOOD NEWS (in big letters). And it comes on the heels of a new year with new possibilities and hopes even after this first week of this new year that has been filled with ups and downs, celebrations and tumultuous times, violence and vaccines.

Mark's Gospel shows us Jesus breaking into the world, in the middle of the wilderness where anyone could be rather than the Temple where we might expect the Messiah – Son of God - to go first. It all happens at the Jordan – this boundary between wilderness and Promised Land. It happens where wild John has called people to repent of their sin and find forgiveness by getting dunked into the river. The scene has been played over many times, and the church has visualized it forever. **SHOW SLIDE:** Greek Orthodox icon

When Jesus is baptized, when the heavens break open and the Spirit-dove descends (or maybe even dive bombs), it's a revelation. A new age is ushered in. Something new is happening. The prophets haven't spoken for centuries, and now John shows up like Elijah, promising that he's just preparing the way. And the One whom he prepares the way for is baptized and then immediately sent into the wilderness. This beautiful scene of heaven and earth coming close doesn't last long, but just long enough for Jesus to hear God's affirmation. **SHOW SLIDE:** art rendering

Robert Coles interviewed children in the 1960s during the time of school integration in the South. Coles was astounded by their courage as they faced threats and mobs. One 8-year-old girl from North Carolina told of a time when she was all alone, and the people were screaming, and "suddenly I saw God smiling, and I smiled" she said. A woman near her shouted using a racial slur and asked what she was smiling at. "I looked right at her face, and I said, 'at God.' Then she looked up at the sky, and then she looked at me, and she didn't call me any more names." It's a powerful word about the Holy Spirit confirming God's love for us.

So there is Good News. Baptism is God's action that proclaims God's love for us. And baptism is a beginning of a life of mission and ministry. God who loves us is also God who calls and sends us.

Baptism is God's action by which we enter into covenant relationship with God. If you were baptized as an infant, your parents or guardians answered on your behalf with the understanding that they and the community of faith would surround you and help you grow in faith and trust in God – and that eventually you'd confirm your faith for yourself. For teens or adults, baptism is recognition of our commitment to follow Jesus – to live under a Jesus ethic that guides our lives – love God and love neighbor.

This week, I've been challenged by the questions that we'll ask today about renouncing, rejecting, and resisting what isn't of God and then repenting (returning to God), and ultimately trusting Jesus and serving him as Lord – as the one who has authority in my life.

As I'm focused on healing of my arm, what does greater healing require from you and me? It's easy to talk about healing, but the work of healing matters. Perhaps today it means listening deeply to the questions we ask at baptism and taking them seriously.

I've had to check myself this week. Maybe there are times I've been silent or at least not vocal enough – complicit or complacent or apathetic – when it comes to speaking up and speaking out and speaking truth to power and sharing Good News.

This isn't just about a little bit of water; this is about identity and ministry and mission and commitment and discipleship. We are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, called beloved, clothed with Christ in baptism, and covered with the Holy Spirit who works within us every day.

Words of the prophets are powerful: words from Amos about justice rolling down like water, words from Micah about doing justice and loving kindness and walking humbly with God, and words from John the Baptizer who calls us to repentance - turn around and turn back to God. John's call to repent rings in my ears because so many times I'd rather focus on someone else and what they have to do to get right with God.

I can still think on those things, and I probably will, but John calls me to look inside – search my heart – and come back to God. And when that water touches me, I remember who I am again. I remember that there's work to do – Kingdom work that doesn't bow to a nation or a leader or a party or an ideology, but seeks to transform this world for God's sake. And I remember that I don't do it alone. We do this as the Body of Christ.

We're challenged to recognize that the Holy Spirit is active and alive in us. One writer says that baptism is "nothing less than being possessed by the Holy Spirit." It's from here that Jesus will begin teaching, healing, and helping people to know God. But first, Jesus is driven into the wilderness.

In baptism, we are water-washed and Spirit-born, as one song says that we'll sing today, and the Holy Spirit gifts us and sends us into ministry as we come to God in

prayer. We cannot do it on our own. Ministry is done because of the presence of the Holy Spirit. We can trust in God's help.

Celebrating baptism reminds us of who we are and whose we are as God's beloved, but there's another piece. Baptism also helps us claim our identity and then live in light of that identity. It's not just about who we are, but also how we act as God's people and how we respond to God's grace.

And we do it together. Prayer and action go together. We come to God – each of us beloved – but we're not limited to the work in our own lives. We seek to transform the world. And there are many images that we see that aren't the world God desires – this week included.

It's okay to stand up boldly and say that what we witnessed this week was not okay and even so pray and hope and long for a better day. It's okay to be not okay and still commit to loving neighbor as a way to bring healing and hope. We do all that knowing that living our faith must be grounded in honesty and accountability for ourselves, for those in power, and for our institutions – the church included.

Last Sunday, we shared Wesley's Covenant Prayer, and I hope it's a blessing to you – and a challenge. Today we reaffirm our baptism. This isn't a re-baptism or a repeating of baptism, but a time to remember it and consider how God's grace leads us every day. And God remembers our baptism, too.

Today can be a beginning for us. A new year. A time to remember our baptism, be thankful, and keep on remembering and thanking God and serving God. We make vows and keep them. The Holy Spirit works within us. Remember your baptism and be thankful to be partners together with Christ and the Church as we transform the world in love. We are the visible evidence of the presence of Christ in the world. I hope that brings joy and challenge.

Reaffirmation of Holy Baptism

United Methodist Centric Post:

Brothers and sisters in Christ: Through the Sacrament of Baptism, we are initiated into Christ's holy Church. We are incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the Spirit. All this is God's gift, offered to us without price.

On behalf of the whole Church, I ask you:

Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?

Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?

Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?