

## **Epiphany Sunday Jan. 10, 2021**

Baptism of the Lord Trinity UMC

Pastor Geri Hamlen

### **Scripture** Mark 1: 4 – 13

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness,  
proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.  
And people from the whole Judean countryside  
and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him,  
and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.  
Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist,  
and he ate locusts and wild honey.  
He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me;  
I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.  
I have baptized you with water;  
but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."  
In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee  
and was baptized by John in the Jordan.  
And just as he was coming up out of the water,  
he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.  
And a voice came from heaven,  
"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."  
And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.  
He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan;  
and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

### **Message** 'It All Starts with God' Gen. 1: 1 - 3

*When God began to create heaven and earth, and the earth then was welter and waste and darkness over the deep and God's breath hovering over the waters, God said, 'Let there be light.' And there was light.<sup>1</sup>*

It all starts with God. In the beginning then and in the beginnings of now and the future...God's breath, God's spirit is hovering over the darkness, over the deep and formless void that opens up all around us sometimes. Even this week, as we witnessed a darkness of lies and violence spewing forth and descending upon the Capital in Washington D.C. Be assured that the Wind of God, the Spirit of God is hovering over this nation. In the ancient Hebrew language, the verb associated with God's breath-wind-spirit also describes an eagle flying back and forth over its young with a sense of nurturing, protecting. From the beginning, God's protective and powerful presence in our world, in our lives, in our country is assured.

It all starts with God.

Even the active ministry of Jesus starts with God...in Mark's Gospel retelling of Christ's Baptism, we hear about the Spirit, the Breath, the Wind of God descending like a dove from the heavens with the words, the Words of God: You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased.

Jesus' ministry starts with Baptism of the Holy Spirit but we know that God was at work long before that particular event in his conception and birth and we know that God will continue to be present to Jesus even after, as he wanders the wilderness where the angels will sustain him.

John the Baptist, of course, was the forebearer, appointed by God to be the announcer of God's presence among us in Jesus. John was the one preparing the way for Jesus and his baptism and ministry. John, in his camel hair and belt, eating locusts and honey, was there to guide the people so they would be ready to receive the Holy Spirit through Jesus. But first, the people needed exactly what John offered: a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. First the people had to admit where they had gone wrong and allow the gift of forgiveness to fall on them through the baptism that John offered.

There is a lot of stuff in the Bible that is hard for us to imagine. This week, with all that has built up and is exploding around us in our country, perhaps one of the hardest things to imagine from the Bible is that people from the countryside, from small towns and people from Jerusalem, from big cities, would come together to admit that they were wrong. That's what was happening, you know, when the people in the Bible went down to the River and allowed John to baptize them. They were acknowledging their wrongdoing and thinking and being and they wanted to turn from it. That's what repentance means. Turning away from evil and going in a Godly direction. Can you imagine a whole bunch of people in this day and age doing anything close to that?

That would mean...a whole bunch of people publicly claiming...

I did it wrong.

I let myself be swayed by falsehoods and unproven theories.

I followed a human being who led me astray and I don't want to do that anymore.

Can you imagine people today saying: I am filled with hate and anger for those who are causing all this damage and chaos. But I don't want to feel like that anymore.

Saying: I'm tired of being scared and of complaining and really, really tired of trying to figure out why this is happening...I just want to be someone who can bring the light of God's love and mercy into this dark mess.

That would be amazing, wouldn't it?

There is much in our time and place that cries out for repentance. John the Baptist would say come on down to this river and be washed clean. Turn away from what you are doing and thinking and feeling and let the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Living God lead you in a different direction. That's what repentance is, right? That's what God stands ready to offer and deliver when asked. And yet, when we are mired in the muck of lies and fear and hatred, as we are right now, we maybe forget that God offers us a way through it all. There is a better path to take and we may not be able to find it on our own. And that's OK as long as we remember that the Holy Spirit of God hovers and flutters and breathes on us and will show us the way when we ask for help. Like I'm saying this morning...it all starts with God!

There is nothing so new and difficult that God can't help us. And what's happening now in our country is not such a new thing if you read the history of the civilizations. There are terribly wrong, illegal, immoral, destructive people in the world and there always have been. Fear and lies and hatred are the evil forces at work in the heart and soul of people throughout history and now, we see it in this country. Not by immigrants. Not by people of color. Not by foreign armies or middle eastern terrorists. No...we are seeing just what kind of illegal and immoral acts can be done by people who look like us and could just as easily be living next door to us.

You probably don't need to hear me saying what's being said on the news and in the papers about the damage being done to our identity as a democracy and to our foundational values of liberty and justice for all...Values which have not even been fully lived out yet in our democracy are being ground into the dirt and mocked by violence and selfish demands for unearned power and respect.

What you do need to hear me say is that This is not new in the history of the world. It's not even new in the history of this country if you dig a little deeper. But it's new for many of us and these horrible events of the last week call us to remember that above and beyond the here and now...God's Holy Spirit is with us and around us. It all starts with God.

Such times as this challenge us who follow Jesus to remember that God has already provided us with a strategy, a plan for such a time as this. The baptism of God's Holy Spirit—preceded by repentance--can guide us through the ugliness of these days. It all starts with God, my friends.

So many of us are baptized as babies that we need to be reminded that our Baptism is a way of life...not just a momentary, sacramental event. Throughout our days, our Baptism reminds us to do our own soul-searching because we all fall short. We all need to grieve and repent of our own wrong doing in the assurance that forgiveness is God's greatest gift to us through Jesus Christ.

Baptism reminds us that we all need to renounce and resist the spiritual forces of wickedness and resist the evil powers of this world in whatever form it takes. We need to push that awful stuff away from us and when fear and lies and hatred start to overwhelm us...then we have our baptism to remind us that we can accept the freedom and power that God gives us to resist...yes resistance is possible to evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.

Baptism is a mighty gift to us. It's an identity marker of those who confess Jesus as our Savior. They will know we are Christians...yes by our love as the song says but also they will know we are followers of Jesus when they see us living as those who put our whole trust in God's grace. When we live as those who promise to serve Jesus...to learn from Jesus...to remember Jesus in our darkest and most difficult times. That's how we can show the world that evil doesn't get to win. Lies and hatred and fear will not be the end of the story as long as the people who love Jesus...take that love and apply it, spread it, shower it on the welter and the waste and the deep darkness that is all around us.

Baptism is not just a gift to each of you individually...it is also the core foundational act and sign of the Church. We are not individual little boats on a sea of chaos. No, we are God's beloved community. Together we can do so much more than any one of us could ever do alone. The power of each individual baptism multiplies and divides and strengthens and enforces the bonds of kinship and family within our churches and denominations. Jesus is the head of the church and he is counting on us to live out the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. Not just in sickness and in death and in financial insecurity. No, Jesus wants the church, through our shared baptism, to show what it looks like to renounce the lies and fear and hatred and to resist the forces of evil...together. As a family. As a community of faith.

Not that the church doesn't have some repenting to do too...In reading up on baptism this week, I was reminded of something I learned recently.

Baptism used to be a much more robust part of community life. Back in the 1600's—that century when the powerful nations of Europe were sending out explorers and setting up colonies in North America...It had already been a long-standing custom in England that Christians—baptized and bonded together as spiritual brothers and sisters—could not enslave one another. That custom probably arose from Paul's letter to the Galatians 3: '...for in Christ you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.' In England and on the European continent I would guess...that was a sturdy and enduring understanding of baptism...not just for individual salvation but for the people of God as the beloved community on earth as it is in heaven. How cool, right?

But that custom didn't survive in the colonies of what was to become the United States of America. In September, 1667, the Virginia General Assembly (the governing body at the time, under the King of England) decided, enacted, declared 'that the conferring of baptism does not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage or freedom.' The assembly was reacting to public pressure from the church and slave holders as to whether or not baptism would render slaves free. Can you imagine? The Church wants to baptize people because Jesus said go, baptize, make disciples and teach. (Matthew 28:19 – 20) The slave holders wanted free labor in order to work their farms and make their money. How would the economy sustain itself if every African brought to this country in chains was then baptized and set free? The Church compromised with the profit motive and agreed that the sacrament of baptism, the power of God's grace over human greed wasn't sufficient grounds for human beings to be set free, liberated...as Jesus came to do.<sup>2</sup>

There was a victory for the marketplace and a weakening of the Baptismal covenant—and an injustice to a group of people who God holds precious and dear. All of this in the land that would become the United States of America. A missed opportunity for sure.

Yes, even the church has some history to clean up and repenting to do but let us remember...it all starts with God.

There is no sin, past, present or future that cannot be redeemed under the mercy, grace and love of God through Jesus Christ. And there is no evil that can separate us from the power of the God who started it all and who offers us: A baptism of Repentance first, then baptism of the Holy Spirit...that same precious wind/breath/spirit that wafted over the darkness and void of the pre-historical deep...stands ready to wash us clean, set us free, turn us all away from the darkness that we witness and may even embody here and now.

It all starts with God. This is the Season of Epiphany. The Season of light so let us all live out these difficult days and weeks knowing that God said 'Let there be light' and there was light and that light can be you and all of us and each of us when we affirm that there is something bigger and better and more loving and holy available to this country and to all the world. And that something is Jesus Christ, the source of all the forgiving grace that we can and will ever need.

Let us affirm our Faith

### **Affirmation of Faith**<sup>3</sup>

*I affirm my faith in the little graces of life:*

*The urgency of growth, the strength of laughter, the vitality of friendship.*

*I affirm my confidence in the dignity of humanity:*

*Our fortitude in despair, our strength in weakness, our love in hatred.*

*I affirm my joy in the experience of living:*

*The Fragrance of nostalgia, the scattered moments of delight, the exhilaration of danger.*

*I affirm my need of others:*

*The offerings of faiths, the gifts of variety, the quality of difference.*

*I affirm my hunger for God:*

*The desire for fulfillment, the ache for understanding, the sense of peace.*

May this be the Season of Affirmation.

<sup>1</sup> Alter, Robert, The Five Books of Moses, New York, W.W. Norton, 2004, p. 17. Genesis 1:1 - 3

<sup>2</sup> Tisby, Jemar, The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2019, p. 25 - 26.

<sup>3</sup> Thurman, Howard, The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations, Richmond IN, Friends United Press, 1973 reprinted 2011, p. 30.