



Reflections for Baptism of our Lord, January 10, 2021

“What is God up to now?”

Welcome, church and Facebook friends I am Lisa Williams pastor at San Pedro United Methodist Church, and we are glad to be worshipping with you today. Today in our Christian calendar we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord.

Whew, what a week! I am going to call out the elephant in the room. As of yesterday, CBS News report that every 8 minutes a person in LA County dies of COVID and we all saw the destruction that took place at our Capital on Wednesday. More than ever, it is time for us to hear the truth of God’s voice breaking through the clouds of our lives as we go to our knees in prayer. I am going to share a prayer I wrote earlier this week:

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer...

This week marked a day in our Country like no other. The “People’s House” was the scene of loss of lives, violence, and destruction.

Lord in your mercy hear the cries of your children...

Our history will forever be imprinted with the unimaginable scene of people scaling the Capital walls, a scene we cannot and should not erase from our minds and hearts.

The hearts of the American people, and the heart of American democracy have been forever altered.

Lord in your mercy hear the cries of your children...

Today, we rise like the morning sun as we lament the loss of innocence and discern how to heal a wounded nation. We are heartbroken for the lives who have been lost to this invisible disease.

God of love and compassion we cry out to you asking for the courage to model for the world what it means when we say, “our words matter, our actions matter, and our faith matters.”

Lord in your mercy hear the cries of your children...

Shower us gracious One with courage and strength to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with you and all of your children. Amen.

Not sure about you but I think it is time for some good news. Well, we are in luck because that is what the Gospel of Mark is offering us today. Mark 1:1-11

1 The beginning of the good news^[a] of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.^[b]

2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,^[c]

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,^[d]

who will prepare your way;

3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”

4 John the baptizer appeared^[e] in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 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. 6 Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 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. 8 I have baptized you with^[f] water; but he will baptize you with^[g] the Holy Spirit.”

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 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. 11 And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved;^[h] with you I am well pleased.”

New year, new beginnings, and a new scene. We begin our new Christian year by delving deep into the Gospel of Mark. Now Mark does not start off with a cute cuddly baby instead he goes right to the good news, introduces us to John the Baptist who preaches repentance, and we are reminded what the prophet Isaiah foretold.

Frederica Mathewes-Green says, “The first time Jesus appears, in the first gospel, the first instruction he hears from John the Baptist is "Repent."

From then on, it's his most consistent message. In all times and every situation, his advice is to repent. Not just the scribes and Pharisees, not just the powerful -- he tells even the poor and oppressed that repentance is the key to eternal life. ...

Repentance is the doorway to the spiritual life, the only way to begin. It is also the path itself, the only way to continue. Anything else is foolishness and self-delusion. Only repentance is both brute-honest enough, and joyous enough, to bring us all the way home.”

--Frederica Mathewes-Green, "Repentance, both door and path," excerpted from *The Illumined Heart*, Paraclete Press, 2001. frederica.com. Retrieved August 1, 2017.

Mark starts with the baptism in the River Jordan. The first thing that Mark tells us is that Jesus shows up - Step One – showing up. He lines up with the others on the banks of the River Jordan to get baptized. I have often wondered why Mark starts where he does? Could be that he

did not know about Jesus' birth and early life or maybe he does but he doesn't find it particularly important to understanding who Jesus is.

Philip Martin recaps what is happening, "John is preaching and performing a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The people came to be washed by him in the Jordan in order to demonstrate their readiness to live in God's coming kingdom. They probably weren't the most religious people you could find, but (in contrast to the most religious types) these people knew their sin. I would say that is Step Two – to know and acknowledge—our shortcomings, and brokenness—what is causing us to live out of step with God?

The people that gathered that day on the Jordan knew that their own sinfulness and imperfections were somehow not what God expected of them and that in God's kingdom, only the cleanest and purest would be appropriate.

Step Three– Repentance, this is a fancy way of saying a change in mind, or a change in heart. That day the people felt a need for a change in mind. In the midst of this hodge-podge group of sinners stands Jesus. He moves with the ordinary folks in line—those that are in line are the ones who have gotten in trouble with the law, all those who have made bad mistakes with their lives or some other crime of the heart, all those who've ever let God down in any way. It may seem a little strange to imagine Jesus there, in that line, because, to our knowledge, he has done nothing to get in trouble with anyone.

Yet there Jesus is, placing himself shoulder to shoulder with everyone else. And when Jesus is baptized, he sees the heavens torn open and the Holy Spirit descending like a dove. A voice thunders from above, identifying this ordinary man as the Beloved Son of God.

I think the reason Mark starts with Jesus' baptism is because he wants to get this important message out into the world: Jesus comes to be immersed in the experience of humanity. God anoints Jesus to be his Son and yet have him live as a man."

This begs the question - What is God up to now? What does God want us to know about Jesus and his role in our world? How do you think Jesus felt when he saw the heavens torn apart? How does that make you feel when you hear those words- he saw the heavens torn apart? No other gospel describes this scene quite like Mark does.

For me, that image of tearing apart the heavens feels heavy, powerful, and significant for where we are today in our country. God seems to be on the loose. By God sharing with us his beloved son, tearing open the heavens to make way for Jesus he is telling us that Jesus will not stay distanced from us, he will be right in our business every step of the way. For some, that may be good news while others may say, that's okay God you keep the heavens hemmed up and stay where you are. Yet, that is not the message we will get – God through Jesus is about to cause good trouble.

God on the loose in the world - wow what a great image – I started off by saying "hear the truth of God's voice breaking through the clouds of our lives." Truth can only come after we

listen and discern, when we are wrong, we are called to repent and then we are able to move onto reconciliation. Truth comes before reconciliation.

Acts 19 recounts Paul's visit to Ephesus; he asked a few "did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers – the people had a choice to make - tell the truth or make up a lie. Fortunately, they choice truth – when they said, No, we have not even heard of this Holy Spirit thing. Paul questions them and says, "then how were you baptized?" they replied, "into John's baptism." But John's baptism was the baptism of repentance, Paul's tells them. Once they heard this Paul laid hands on them and the Holy Spirit came upon them – good thing they all spoke truth that day.

We use water in our baptism, water is a sign of cleansing and water is ultimately a vehicle to renewal. It is in that spirit that I invite you renew your baptism. If you were baptized as a child or as an adult, you do not need to be rebaptized again, but you can always renew your baptismal vows. If you have not been baptized and wish to, please reach out and let me know.

In this time of God running loose in our world, we need to be aligned with God's values and one way we can do that is through renewal of baptism.

Our God created new life forms and brought them up from the waters of chaos, embraced them, and called them good. Jesus was baptized in the river Jordan by John the Baptist; this became living water for each of us. Jesus embraces those who are poor, oppressed, marginalized and all who come seeking. When we follow Jesus by living into our Baptismal vows, we have a place to begin a new life no matter where we are on our journey or how old we are. We are given a daily gift to join Jesus in love and service.

Here are some questions for you to ponder this week about your own baptism. Think about what this means to you and how you might use it as you delve deeper into God's story.

Do you renew and affirm the promises made at your Baptism?

Do you recognize the call of God to be God's people always?

Do you embrace the way of Jesus in faith and ministry?

Do you accept the nurture of the Holy Spirit who renews your spirit each day?

Do you accept and embrace others who seek a liberating faith in God?

Through renewing your baptismal vows, remember your Baptism and rejoice. Baptism is a gift of acceptance and welcome into the care of Christ's church where you may begin again a life filled with faith and love. And that is the good news! Amen

Benediction: May the God water and truth, cleanse you and renew you today, tomorrow, and always. Amen