

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

January 10, 2021

The Baptism of Christ

PRELUDE “*Shall We Gather at the River*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning, my friends. And welcome to worship. It is very good to gather together in the presence of God: to listen for God’s Word for us and for our lives, especially in these crazy, challenging days; to bring our prayers before God and to dedicate ourselves again to doing God’s work in the world. We come together so that we can be strengthened, renewed and restored, so that we can be sent out to share God’s love and grace with those we meet and in all that we do. I give thanks that God invites us together for worship. Let us join our hearts and minds in this time of prayer and worship.

CALL TO WORSHIP

(Dip hand in water) The voice of God spoke over the waters,

And the voice of God said, “Let there be... and there was.”

The voice of God said, “Let there be the United Church of Christ Congregational, and there was.”

And it was good.

(Dip hand in water) The voice of God came from heaven.

And the voice of God said, “You are my daughter, the beloved... You are my son, the beloved...”

With you I am well pleased.”

In the washing of the baptismal waters, we became light – light in the world.

And God saw that the light was good!

(Jeffrey S. Nelson, Before the Amen)

SONG “*Crashing Waters at Creation*”

Crashing waters at creation ordered by the Spirit’s breath,
First to witness day’s beginning from the brightness of night’s death.

Cleansing water once at Jordan closed around the One foretold,
Opened to reveal the glory ever new and ever old.

Living water, never ending, quench the thirst and flood the soul.
Well-spring, Source of life eternal, drench our dryness, make us whole.

CALL TO RECONCILIATION

You and I are now the ones who step up out of the safe waters of baptism, to bring hope, to share a word of grace, to carry healing into the brokenness of the lives around us. Let us confess how we still struggle to follow in faith where Jesus leads us. Let us pray together:

PRAYER FOR FORGIVENESS (in unison)

Timeless God, you cast Light into sin's dark places and call us your Beloved. Forgive us: when we still linger in the shadows; when we treat others in hurtful ways; when we speak ill of your friends. As he knelt in the waters of Jordan, you proclaimed Jesus as your Child, pointing to him as the way to you. Forgive us: when we put ourselves ahead of him; when we think he is no longer needed; when we fail to see him in the broken of our world. Baptized and blessed in your living waters, you would have us be your servants in our time. Forgive us: when we fail to welcome the

stranger; when we refuse to forgive as we should; when we believe we are too good to kneel down and tie the shoes of the lost, the least, the last, the little.

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

Touched by the waters of life, fed at the feast of grace and hope, embraced in the warmth of God's love and hopes - this is good news!

Blessed by baptism's tears, called to servanthood by the Beloved, filled with the peace of the Spirit, we are indeed God's people - redeemed, restored, refreshed to serve. Thanks be to God! Amen.

(Thom M. Shuman, *When the Broken Gather*)

SCRIPTURE READING Mark 1:1-11

Janice Solum

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”

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.”

SERMON

Maybe you can explain it to me, but it baffles my mind. I'm not sure how word spread in biblical days, but clearly there was no Twitter or Facebook, Fox News or CNN. I'm assuming word of mouth, but that takes time. The juicier the news, the less time it takes, but how juicy is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins? Maybe it was the rumors about John that compelled them, not because he sounded like the best thing since sliced bread, but because who can imagine a rock star turned out in camel hair, chewing on locusts dipped in honey – which without a doubt meant he was also licking his fingers after every morsel. I mean, really. Compelling is not the word I would use. And yet the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem flocked to the banks of the River Jordan to catch a glimpse of the guy. Long gray winter, following months on end of alternating social distancing with isolation, and any old distraction will do? Maybe there are signs of spring nudging them into thinking it's time to turn over a new leaf, shed the COVID-19 and get the place cleaned up, or at least something had them ready to make their confession and get scrubbed clean in the river. Whatever it was, Mark tells us that the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem – everybody who was anybody mixed together with the nobodies; they all made their way out to the Jordan; and met up alongside the river that stood as a border between the wilderness and the land flowing with milk and honey.

Somewhere in the midst of that crowd, Jesus strolled around, hands in his pockets, watching the families with fussy babies, the teenagers who thought their parents were crazy for bringing them here in the first place and now out of their minds if they thought they were going into that dirty old river, the Grandmas and Grandpas who were going to need help getting into and out of the water, but were determined to do it. The loners and losers, the big wigs and bureaucrats, the wounded and worried were all there. Jesus watched them and then quietly took his place among them, silently waiting his turn until eventually he stood before John, who lowered him into the water and then stood him back up. Which is when the fireworks went off and the excitement began. Mark reports that as Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart, and the Spirit descending like a dove (you decide if it fluttered, soared or dive bombed); and he heard a voice from heaven, saying, You are my Son, the Beloved; with you, I am very well pleased.

There's a lot about this story that is richly compelling. First of all, I want to make sure you realize that what you heard today is the very beginning of the Gospel of Mark. In this version of the story, there is no angel visitor, no Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem, no birth in a barn or visits from either the shepherds or exotic magi from afar. Mark begins with John baptizing the masses, including Jesus. You can only imagine how troubling it's been to theologians and scholars since the first day the story was told, as they've scrambled to figure out why in the world Jesus was lining up to receive a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. What's he done? What adolescent prank, angry outburst, willful rebellion, apathetic disinterest lies hidden in his closet? Or maybe he's there to be baptized because he's taking his place beside the rest of us who really do have faults and failings to confess; demonstrating that he has no interest in holding himself apart from or above us, he stands with and beside us, in a location where he can catch our eye, offer his hand, hear our whispered pleas, wipe away the stain of our sin.

And then there's the place where Mark tells us that Jesus saw the heavens torn apart. I don't know if you remember or not, but we started the season of Advent with a text from Isaiah 64, that opens with the plea, O that you would tear open the heavens and come down. Don't feel badly if you don't recall that – I had to check the file to be sure. But yes, there it was. I described those words as a pushy prayer from desperate people at the end of their rope and calling out to God, both demanding to know where God has gotten off to and pleading for God to get down here and do something to clean up the mess. Here, in this passage, Mark tells us God has arrived. The heavens are open, the highway is clear, the path is straight and God is on the loose. God's Spirit has alighted on Jesus and God's voice has spoken words of adoption and deep, abiding love. Together, there's no telling what they will get up to, but it is abundantly clear that God is done being safely hemmed up in heaven. In and with Jesus, God has come close and is on the loose among us and around the world: in our faces and behind our backs, assuring us we can do the hard things we need to do, challenging our twisting and turning of the truth, disturbing our complacency, empowering our weakness, poking holes in our arrogance, filling in the potholes in our self-confidence, pointing in all the directions toward all of the people we're asked to love.

It's almost as if this is Mark's version of a Christmas story. There's no angel chorus or bright and brilliant star, no moments of adoration or rich and fragrant gifts from afar, but in Mark's version of the story, this is where God arrives and gets ready to go to work. But God doesn't work alone or in isolation; if that's what God had in mind, God could have stayed in heaven. When Jesus arrived on the scene, God tore open the heavens and came to earth to partner with Jesus, that together they could get to work cleaning up the mess, healing the wounds, filling empty bellies, dismantling walls of division, erecting bridges of reconciliation, stirring up good trouble together. And God and Jesus partnered with us as well when we were baptized, when we said yes to God's presence in our lives and movement in the world, and when we let ourselves be tattooed as sons and daughters by the overflowing love of God.

Jesus' ministry began with baptism, and in the moment of being named and claimed by God. For those of us who have been baptized the same is true: we also have been claimed by God, wrapped in and infused by love, and tattooed as beloved daughters and sons of God. I don't know that many of us understand baptism as going to work for God, but it seems to me that's what God hopes for. I've always articulated the sacrament of baptism as being about the outrageous gift of love to us by God: whether we're tiny babies who know nothing of what is going on, or alert adults who are doing our best to grow in faith, baptism is about reaching for us in love, drawing us close, and naming us as daughters and sons. Once we've been given that name, we wear it for life. The only question that's left is what we do with it; if we will put God's love to work as we seek to accompany Jesus in his work of healing and embracing, feeding and liberating, forgiving and welcoming all.

There's a poem that I love, and that I love to bring out about this time of the year. It was written by Howard Thurman, who was a black pastor in California and then teacher in Boston, a poet and mystic who lived in the 1900's, died in 1981. He wrote a poem that helps remind me what the celebration of Christmas and the life of Jesus are all about, as well as what my role is in it all. It's entitled, "The Work of Christmas":

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers,
To make music in the heart.

As we grow into the work of Christmas, we also grow into the gift and calling of our baptisms. When we walk with Jesus and grow as his followers, we wear our names as sons and daughters of God for others to see. We encourage the work of love and we spread the good news of God's presence. God is loose in the world and in search of partners to sign up for the work of mercy and grace, beauty and peace. Will you join hands with God and Jesus, and all those who share Christ's baptism, to do the work of love? May it be so.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Geoff: Thank you, Lord, for your Rule of Law and the 10 "Guideposts for Happiness", as I like to call the 10 Commandments. Mask up, Love your neighbor, Go forward.

PASTORAL PRAYER

It has been a week, Holy God, and so we come to you bringing along with us all of the fear, anger, hurt, confusion, dread, sadness and weariness that we carry with us. COVID numbers continue to climb, with infections, hospitalizations and deaths all continuing to break records, overcrowd hospitals and exhaust medical personnel. On the day of Epiphany, as we celebrated the coming of your light, we experienced one of the darkest days in our country's history, as protesters stormed the capital and became rioters; as elected officials labored with a task assigned by the Constitution, an angry mob destroyed property, invaded offices, threatened lives. As tensions grow and demands intensify, we bring all of the tangled mess of our lives and of our country to you, seeking wisdom and courage, strength

and compassion, tenderness and love. Give us enough anger to protect the vulnerable and enough compassion to listen to the angry, enough courage to say what needs to be said and enough self-control to know that some things are better left unsaid. We pray for safety in this time of national transition, and for a clear and consistent vision of who you would have us be, how you would call us to live together in these days, what it means to walk together in your ways.

In the ancient words of St. Francis, we ask: Lord, make us instruments of your peace: where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. O divine Master, grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Hear our prayers, spoken and unspoken (*silence*) And hear us as we join in the prayer that Jesus taught, saying: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERING

The second Sunday of the month is traditionally the time when we invite donations to our Emergency Aid Fund, a fund that allows us to respond to the needs of the community and to people who may come seeking some form of assistance. I had another one of those phone calls just before Thanksgiving, when a woman called to say that she was in Wallace and in need of a place to spend the night, a warm place where she could rest while trying to make contact with her family and create a plan with them for her to continue her trip east. Because of the money you have made available, I was able to work with Rick at the Wallace Inn, and we provided her with a room and breakfast. When I spoke with her again the next day, she was in the process of setting up a Western Union transfer from her family that would allow her to buy a bus ticket and be on her way. The bed, the shower, the food had given her exactly what she needed, and she was deeply grateful. I'm grateful too for your generosity that allows me to respond to requests for help, and allows us together to be the Church and do the work of Christ. Thank you for making this ministry possible.

SONG "Be Thou My Vision"

Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart; Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art -
Thou my best thought, by day or by night, Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.

Be Thou, my Wisdom, and Thou my true Word; I ever with Thee and Thou with me, Lord;
Though my great Father, I Thy true child, Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one.

Riches I heed not, nor earth's empty praise, Thou mine inheritance, now and always;
Thou and Thou only, first in my heart, High God of heaven, my Treasure Thou art.

BENEDICTION

Go in peace; love and care for one another in the name of Christ;
and may the Spirit of God which filled John and Jesus, fill your hearts, souls and minds;
may the power of God which upheld them, strengthen you for each day;
and may the love of God which directed their every action be your guiding light and your shining star,
both now and forevermore. Amen (Rev. Richard J. Fairchild, **Kir-shalom** website.)