

## **Baptized Beloved**

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Rev. Mary Koon

January 10, 2021

Mark 1: 4–11 (NRSV)

Our scripture this morning is a scene filled with color, sound and texture – it is cinematic in nature. It’s the story of Jesus’ baptism from the gospel of Mark. Baptism is where Mark begins Jesus’ story, not the manger. There are no angels, shepherds or sparkly stars in this story. In typical Mark fashion, the account is told plainly, and with a sense of urgency.

Jesus’ baptism is a familiar story, one we tell each January on this Sunday, and like all good stories, if it’s worth hearing once, it is worth hearing over and over. The Biblical story is **our** story as well. It is rooted deep within us and reminds us of who we are and to whom we belong.

Mark 1:4–11

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 Jesus 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."

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

God's going to trouble the water and we are called to make good trouble, as John Lewis said. This song has been on my mind and stirred my heart from the time I first heard it years ago. The lyrics tell the history of God's liberating power for God's people through the waters.

What are the waters we wade in these days and how is God troubling those waters, leading us forth to new life?

Water plays a significant role in the history of the people of God. The Bible is bookended with images of water. In Genesis, before anything, God spirit was a formless void moving over the water, and from there all life begins. In the book of Revelation, the river of life signals a new heaven and new earth at the end of the age.

In the Hebrew Bible, God rescues the Israelites, leading them through the red sea as they escaped slavery in Egypt, and provides water in the desert for the wandering tribes as Moses holds a stick and a rock. God saves Hagar and Ishmael from death by giving them water. And Israel is led into the promised land, through the Jordan River... the same river we find John baptizing people millennia later. In his ministry, Jesus teaches by the water, turns water into wine at a wedding party, performs miracles on the sea, breaks boundaries at a well in Samaria, and serves up abundance on the seashore to the fisher men after his resurrection.

John, preacher prophet of the bug-eating, hairy outfit, strong, silent type variety, was baptizing people in the Jordan River. A baptism of

repentance, a turning from sin and selfishness, of living small lives toward God, with an open heart and willingness to be God's person in a new way.

The call to repentance wasn't new for God's people, but clearly something different is happening here.

Mark states that "all" the people of Jerusalem are coming to him in the wilderness. This is a narrative tool. Jerusalem was the heart of religious power, and those who lived there might seek repentance in the temple with the priest, but they were not. All the action, all the excitement is happening way outside Jerusalem in the wilderness – away from the halls of political and religious power. So Mark shows us right away that with Jesus, the power dynamic of empire's "power over" and "might makes right" is about to shift, indeed must shift, to a Jesus model of empowerment or "power with one another" if there is to be a future of justice and love.

Every gospel writer makes it clear that Jesus is different, that God is doing a new thing in him and John the Baptist, too, points to that reality. John's preaching does not focus on himself and what he is doing, but points to Jesus and the life-giving Spirit that he brings.

Jesus' life of ministry – his commissioning - begins in the waters of baptism, where it comes quietly. There is no fanfare or pageantry as Jesus arrives at the bank of the river. Maybe some people recognize him as "that carpenter's son," but he has yet to begin his public ministry.

Jesus, knowing who he was, could have chosen to stand on the shores of the river, offering a gentle touch or reassuring word to the "regular" folk as they step into the water, wishing them well, or even praying over them. But he doesn't do that. Instead, Jesus wades in the river in order to stand shoulder to shoulder with us regular folk, we who struggle, and

who, despite our best efforts, continue to hurt one another, the earth, and ourselves. Jesus enacts a radical solidarity with the people before they even know who he is.

As Jesus emerges from the waters, we get a cinematic view of what Jesus experiences. The clouds part, the dove descends – that mystery of heaven cracks open - and Jesus is pronounced “beloved” God’s delight.

This is our story, too.

In the church, we understand that baptism is a visible sign of an inward reality. We are called and claimed by God, we die and rise with Christ; all of which we act out at the font, with promises and water and prayers.

In seminary, my worship professor Scott Haldeman said that because the act of baptism is an indelible mark of identity as God’s beloved, something that cannot be taken away, he wished we could be baptized with ink...something that wouldn’t wash off. We would see it in the mirror and others could see it, too.

I thought of that very thing just 18 months ago or so ago when I saw our youth emerge from the youth room after being with, and nurtured by, our youth counselors with stickers all over their faces. Wouldn’t that be something – baptism by sticker?

Claiming God’s beloved as identity is not a sentimental feeling, but a radical truth that is intimately connected with social justice. Because Jesus shows that in baptism, all worldly status is broken down by passing through the waters and this makes way for reconciliation with God and other people. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ideas from Scott Haldeman’s worship class notes, Chicago Theological Seminary, Spring, 2008.

God's beloved are those with whom we disagree so we must listen. God's beloved are those who look, think, speak, and love differently than we do. God's beloved is the earth, the water, the sky. As we claim this identity, we have no choice but to recognize it in others and then we make good trouble in the world. There is no longer "us" and "them", only "we."

The story of Jesus' baptism, of beloved community, and God's gonna trouble the waters was the lens through which I witnessed the events at our nation's capital on Wednesday.

As I turned on the news, I was horrified to see American citizens filling the capitol building, violently wielding power, trying to use force to overthrow a democratically held election.

And I could not help but notice that, as the angry crowd descended on the capitol, despite crossing road barriers and smashing windows to get into the building, despite waving confederate flags and defacing the offices of congress, despite the visible presence of weapons, the angry mob was treated with far more respect than those brown and black peaceful protestors who occupied the same location this summer.

This display of white supremacy cannot be ignored or excused. It comes from a deep well of fear and hatred stoked to a boiling point in our nation. In viewing this scene, I, not for the first time, dropped to my knees, to confess and search my heart for the ways that I, knowingly or not, have been complicit in not recognizing or rejecting systems of racism and oppression. For the ways I have benefitted financially, socially and culturally from such systems. Repentance involves not just confession, but turning from sin toward God. In this case, participating in the difficult work of anti-racism.

And when the camera panned the crowds revealing a banner, draped across a barricade with the words – **Jesus 2020** – I felt like I had been hit in the gut.

Lord have mercy.

By displaying that sign, the attacking mob was proclaiming that God was endorsing their actions. That Jesus was with them in this hatred and violence. This is a dangerous misreading of the Bible and abuse of the name of Jesus.

It is possible that these people thought that they were causing “good trouble” at the capitol building, but God never, ever troubles the water with hate.

In everything Jesus did, said, and taught, he stripped the illusion of “power over” as a way to live in community, the illusion that “might makes right”, and that peace is found through violence and intimidation.

Though we may be feeling outrage and discouragement, we know that Jesus offers a different way. Hate is easy, but it destroys the soul. Love is hard but is life-giving.

So, where do we go from here? We begin in the waters of baptism.

Consider Howard Thurman, preacher, poet, mystic and peace activist who influenced the civil rights movement of the 1960’s. As a child in Florida, he went to the deacons in his church wanting to be baptized, but they turned him away, told him he wasn’t Christian enough, he needed a more compelling conversion story.

But his grandmother wouldn’t take it and marched young Howard back to the Deacons, and told them he was a Christian long before coming to them. And shortly after, Thurman was baptized in the Halifax River.

In those waters, Thurman really did receive a new identity – what he calls a “*fontal* sense of worth that would not be destroyed.” He grew surrounded by this community, and was shown throughout his life that he was accountable to the faith he claimed and what he did with his life mattered as a holy child of God.

When she felt that her grandchildren’s sense of identity was flagging, Thurman’s grandmother would gather her grandchildren close and tell them the story of her life as a slave. Twice a year, a local slave preacher would come and preach. No matter what he preached he would always end by looking them in the eye and telling them, “You are not what they say you are. You are not slaves. You are God’s beloved children.”

This sense of beloved identity sustained Thurman’s grandmother through slavery and rooted Thurman in who he was, too. It held him through both the indignities of Jim Crow laws and the accolades of being an esteemed professor. He was compelled to share the good news of the gospel of liberation and sought to meet hatred with love in order allow the oppressors and enemies know that they, too, were holy children of God. (Story from:

<https://www.cathedralatl.org/sermons/remember-your-baptism-you-are-a-holy-child-of-god/>)

On this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, let’s remember our baptism and our call to life in gospel community. For today...

Each time you wash your hands...and I know you do that a lot because of Covid... as you feel the warm water run over your hands and wrists, remember your baptism. Know in your deepest being that you are God’s beloved, sealed in Christ’s love forever. That your belovedness commissions you to do the work of love to which you are uniquely called. And pray for the strength to wade into the water and discern how you and how we continue our work of justice and peace. AMEN.