

Beginning Again
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – January 7, 2024

PLEASE READ:
Genesis 1:1-5
Mark 1:4-11

Today is the first Sunday of 2024, but also the first Sunday of Epiphany, the festival celebrated yesterday just after the 12 days of Christmas. Epiphany is the celebration of the three magi, or wise men, probably Zoroastrians from Persia (Iran), who were the first gentiles who followed the star and to whom it was revealed that Christ is the newborn King. The season of Epiphany is the next six weeks focusing on the light of Christ and how Jesus is the new revelation of God's love and how to live in that love. Our Gospel lesson today is Mark's account of the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It begins with Jesus' baptism, and I think offers us an opportunity to explore some of what baptism might mean for us...

Baptism is both a beginning and an end. The term "baptism" comes from the Greek word *baptízo* which literally means to be immersed, overwhelmed, or covered. As amusing as it may be, the Greek word can also mean "to pickle." Scholars believe that John the Baptist was part of a Jewish sect called the Hemerobaptists, which literally means "day bathers," who believed that daily baptism meant eternal life.

According to the New Testament, it was John the Baptist's custom to fully pickle a person in water. This was done as a symbol of a complete turning away from sin and toward a new life of obedience to God. In Ephesians, we read that the early church's belief was that one baptism would suffice. God's forgiveness means freedom, a liberation from guilt and shame. Forgiveness is the end of living in fear and beginning a new life of freedom and confidence (with faith). John Calvin, the French reformer, writes that baptism is the outward sign of an inward grace. It's important to note that God's affirmation of Jesus as beloved comes before he does anything at all. It's all about grace. A person who is baptized is making a new start and acknowledging that God's grace alone can save them. It's not that the daily work of forgiveness and repentance is not necessary, just that grace is God's primary way of transformation. Baptism is the beginning of the journey of grace.

This might raise in your mind the question why Jesus received the baptism of John, which was for the forgiveness of sins? Scripture affirms in the book of Hebrews that indeed Jesus was tempted in every way, but without sin, so why do we read today about Jesus coming to John for baptism?

We can't be sure, but I believe the baptism of Jesus points not to Jesus' need for repentance, but rather to his solidarity with and compassion for humanity, and our great need of repentance. He was baptized because he wanted to show the way of

grace begins with humble obedience and submission to God. As the *Carmen Cristi* affirms, "though he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant..."

Baptism is also a rite of passage into the larger Christian community, as a member of the Body of Christ. There's no such thing as "lone ranger" Christianity, and it can be argued that Christian faith is not about *me*, but *we*. If you read further into our Genesis text, the story of Adam and Eve. Adam only realizes his personhood in relationship to Eve. And so it is with all of us. Paradoxically, we only realize who we are in relationship with other people.

And so in baptism we become people of "the Way," the earliest name for followers of Jesus. Jesus taught his disciples that we are to be salt and light, that we are to turn *away* from self-centeredness and turn *toward* a commitment to love God and our neighbors. He taught there was a difference between light and darkness, and baptism is a sign that a person desires and intends to walk in the light of God.

From the creation of the world, described in our reading from Genesis, God called into being light where there was only darkness. This is not simply poetic. If you would talk to an Astronomer, they would tell you that most of the universe is made up of dark matter, in fact "dark matter" outweighs atomic matter 5 to 1! What we see as darkness is actually a universe full of light waves that we are only now seeing through the different lens of the James Webb Space Telescope in wonderful beauty. There's an estimated 2 trillion galaxies with each containing as many as a trillion stars.¹ God called light into being in a way we could see and appreciate...

But there is a difference between spiritual light and darkness. Our mission statement describes our commitment to walking in the light as "living spiritually, loving inclusively, learning continuously, and leaving a legacy." I have a test for what is light and darkness. Walking in the light will give life and not take life away. It'll expand your mind and not shrink it. Walking in the light will open you up to paradox and mystery and not try to oversimplify reality. It will set you free to give yourself away to something bigger than yourself; and finally, it will bring joy and not despair. This is the way of the light of Christ.

Baptism, then, is a gateway to start on the grace-filled journey of following this way of Christ's light, the way of God's self-giving love. God calls us to live a new life. How do we open ourselves anew to the light of Christ?

¹ Dennis Overbye, "The Early Universe Was Bananas" (*The New York Times*, January 5, 2024).

John the Baptist talks about “repentance,” and you’ve heard many times that repentance literally means to “think again...” Physical darkness isn’t so much about what is evil but about mystery and the unknown in life we need to explore and redeem. You’ve heard it said that the opposite of faith is doubt. Not exactly. *The opposite of faith is rigid certainty.* The opposite of faith is giving up on curiosity and openness to the new thing God seeks to do in and through you. Repentance is opening our hearts and minds to hope, to new possibilities, to the affirmation against all odds that God is still at work in our world.

Therapist Aundi Kolber puts it this way: She talks about repentance as “surrender” and a way of “trying softer” which I find fascinating:

Surrender can lead us to be gentler with ourselves and others, and sometimes it enables us to ride through the waves of pain that life inevitably brings.... Paradoxically, when we choose surrender for the right reasons, it empowers us. A curious mystery comes from honoring the truth that surrender with gentleness can be its own form of strength. Our ability to hold our lives with a flexible, open posture allows God’s power to manifest in us.... When we give ourselves permission to try softer in this way... we remain attuned to our own experiences, which enables us to connect to our truest selves.... We are able to move toward integration, wholeness and peace, open to what may come. Essentially, we grow in our resiliency.²

Staying willfully ignorant is not the way its supposed to be for people of faith, and in that sense staying in the dark is sin. The light of Christ opens up for us new ideas and new ways of living and loving that will help us to grow and mature into the people, into the Beloved Community, God created and calls us to be.

Søren Kierkegaard tells a tale about a king and a maiden which I believe gives insight into why Jesus chose to be baptized and why he commands those who would follow him to do the same... Once upon a time there was a king who fell in love with a maiden from the village. It's an old theme, how love overcomes all barriers of class and race, of status and nationality. But for all its beauty, the king didn't see the matter easily resolved. Wracking his mind was the question: how to declare his love? He summoned to his palace all the wise people of his kingdom and put the question to them. With one accord, they responded, "Sire, nothing could be easier. Your majesty has but to appear in all your glory before the humble cottage of the maiden and instantly she will fall at your feet and be yours."

² Aundi Kolber, *Try Softer: A Fresh Approach to Move Us out of Anxiety ... and into a Life of Connection and Joy* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2020), 212–213.

But it was precisely that thought which so troubled the king. In return for his love, he wanted her love, not greed for his wealth or fear that would lead to her slavish submission. He wanted her glorification, not his. What a dilemma when to declare your love means the end of your beloved, and when not to declare your love means the end of love.

Night after night the king paced the floor of his palace pondering, until at last he saw love's truth: freedom for the beloved demands equality with the beloved.

So, late one night, long after his courtiers and counsellors had retired to their chambers, the king stole out of a side door of the palace and appeared before the humble abode of the maiden dressed in the clothing of a serving man.

Kierkegaard's story is a simple rework of the thought that God comes to us as one of us. God came in such a way that we could understand, "soft," "vulnerable," literally as a baby. Jesus came like one of us so we could understand and embrace both God's truth and God's example of self-giving love. We recognize that God has given us the example of humility and submission, of obedience and complete trust in the grace of God.

The disconcerting thing about this story is that we are left at this moment, with this poignant scene, wondering how it all comes out? Did the maiden open the door? Did the king win his true love? Was his solution to the dilemma satisfactory? Kierkegaard wanted to leave the ending unresolved in order to say that this is how God comes to each of us! It is up to us to provide the ending...

In this new year 2024, and I daresay a year that will be full of challenges, may each one of us open the door and let the light of Christ shine into our lives, and through us into the world. As we begin again by coming to the table today, may we remember our baptism and turn again from darkness to light. May we remember Jesus and how he came to set us free to follow - to return his love. This is how we as the Beloved Community can begin again.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.