

“The Beginning”

Valley Presbyterian Church – January 6, 2024

Epiphany Sunday

Genesis 1:1-5

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Mark 1:1-11

Introduction

Nadia Bolz-Weber, Lutheran pastor and founder of House for All Saints & Sinners in Denver, CO tells about attending a 12-step meeting and discussing what a “higher power” is like, what the “God of our understanding” means, when one of the older guys, who has been sober for about 45 years, remarked, “I don’t know about you, but my God is crazy about me.”

For most of our lives, we have heard the saying, “God loves you” and that we are “God’s beloved.” Sometimes that can feel compulsory, like an empty slogan, as if we are loved by God because he kinda has to since we’re his kids. But to say, “God is crazy about me.” That is different.¹

So, in this morning’s reading about the baptism of Jesus, and as we remember today our own baptisms, try to remember how crazy God is for you, for all of us, his beloved children.

Read Mark 1:1-11

It always takes a little getting used to when the calendar turns: 2024 still seems like a date in the far-away future rather than a present reality. Still, here we are at the beginning of a New Year certain to be filled with changes, questions, challenges, and possibilities.

The first verse of Mark’s gospel reads like a title: “Beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God.” There is no definite article (the) before the first word and no verb to make it a complete sentence. The Greek word for

¹ Nadia Bolz-Weber from *The Corners*

“beginning” is *arche* – as in archeology. Right from the very start, we hear echoes of the creation story in Genesis 1.² This is God’s inbreaking into the world.

And the place where Mark begins his story is in the wilderness, where an unusual scene unfolds in the Judean desert near the Dead Sea, east of Jerusalem. A somewhat oddly dressed prophet by the name of John – who made the wilderness his home – was calling upon people from all over Judea to come, repent, and be baptized.

This summons to the wilderness recalls Israel’s forty-year sojourn before entering the Promised Land. It is where John baptizes Jesus, It also will be where Jesus is taken by the Spirit to be tempted, where he goes to pray, and where he feeds the hungry. For Mark, Jesus’ role as Gods’ anointed One comes not at conception or birth – as we heard in the Christmas stories of Matthew and Luke – it arrives when Jesus submits to John’s baptism.

John announces to the people who come into the wilderness that he is offering a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance – *metanoia* – is a change of perception and course; it is sometimes described as making a U-Turn in the ways we think and act. In Mark, repentance represented “a course correction, envisioning an alternative reality and endeavoring to bring it to fruition.”³ Seen in this light, the people of Judea who came to be baptized by John would have been forced to evaluate their values and lifestyles – to reflect on their complicity in the existing social and economic structures – and to radically alter their commitments.

John is offering baptism for the forgiveness of sins; and John baptizes Jesus. A logical conclusion would, thus, be that Jesus must have sinned. But, the Epistles and later church teaching regard Jesus as “in every respect tempted, as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15) Why, then, would Jesus need to submit to John’s call to repent, be forgiven, and be baptized?

There is, though – as AJ Levine points out – a third option beyond the sin or did not sin dichotomy that might explain Jesus’ baptism. Remember how, in the *Our Father*, we pray “forgive us our debts.” By praying in the plural, we acknowledge being a member of the community, that one person’s sin impacts the many. “Even if we were not personally responsible for a particular sin,” Levine

² Amy Jill Levine, *The Gospel of Mark: A Beginner’s Guide to the Good News*, p. xiii

³ Raj Nadella from *WorkingPreacher.com*

says, “we still atone as a community. By accepting John’s baptism, Jesus can be seen as accepting his role as a part of the human community.”⁴

So it is, likewise, for us. We might not be personally responsible for the ills and hurts that we see around us, but we, nevertheless, still might need a change in mindset or course correction. Whether poverty or discrimination, acts of violence or environmental destruction, we may not see the direct link to our behaviors, but that does not mean we should not participate in their healing or repair; that we cannot strive to be more hopeful, faithful, compassionate, generous, and forgiving.

It is forgiveness that empowers this act of repentance, this about-face in our relationships with God and one another. God’s decision not to hold our past sins against us but to free us from the past enables a future new life with God. And while John offered a baptism of water: washing away the sins of the people from them, Jesus provides a baptism of the Spirit: imbuing within us the energy, imagination, wisdom, and “like crazy” love of God.

And just as the voice from heaven says to Jesus, “You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased,” all participants in baptism are reminded of inclusion in the community and family of God. As God’s beloved, we are called to live as if what we do matters: we apologize for the harmful comment or the failure to offer welcome; we contact the people with whom we need to reconcile, and we share of what we have for the sake of others.

Maybe this could provide the content of our collective resolutions for the New Year. As God’s people, where – we might ask – are we already or could be engaged in ministry within our community? In what ways might we need to have our minds transformed or direction changed in order to better enable life in fullness with God?

Some of know that over the past year we have welcomed back into our space two Alcoholics Anonymous support groups – meeting here on Wednesday and Thursday evenings – as well as two local square dance groups. In collaboration with our Heart of Valley preschool, we were able to repaint and recarpet the narthex and hallways. For his Eagle Scout project, Matthew Louis rehabilitated the south courtyard and with the leftover lumber, we rebuilt the fence around our Faith Garden.

⁴ Levine, p. 9

In large part because of the good work of those many involved with the Pass-It-On resale store, we have also formed or deepened relationships with mission partners including North Church, Homeless Hookup CLE, Chagrin Falls Park Community Center, Womensafe, Next Step, Humble Design, the Dougbe River School in Liberia, and more. We have explored having collaborative youth group gatherings with Christ Church in Chesterland and are looking forward to returning to Montreat Conference Center and hosting another food packaging event.

And through our ongoing work with Thriving Congregations, we are exploring different ways to deepen relationships within the church and widen our reach through partnerships in the community. While many questions and challenges still loom, we remain committed to hearing from and paying attention to as many voices as possible to discern how God is leading us into a faithful and fruitful future.

Today marks this “Beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” In this New Year, we are provided the opportunity to turn things around; to repent of ways that we may have lost our bearings and point ourselves back to the central gospel of Jesus: our call to live life as if it matters by loving both God and our neighbors. That will require us to share our gifts even more openly and welcome more fully; to be willing to maybe live for a while in the wilderness in order to prepare ourselves for the healing and transformation of the world.

As we come to the Lord’s Table this morning, let us remember our own baptism and that, like Jesus, we are God’s beloved children – not because of what we have done, but because God has endowed us with opportunities to love and give in the way Jesus has done for us. All thanks be to God. Amen.