

## SERMON NOTES

January 10, 2021

### Brooding.... Mark 1: 4-11; Genesis 1: 1-5 Don Lincoln

I've been doing baptisms for more than 40 years. And this is the longest time I've gone without officiating at one. Another victim of COVID-19. We have a dozen "babies in waiting" if you will. I look forward to when we can gather together again to celebrate this sacrament as a faith community, claiming God's promises and committing to nurturing new disciples in the ways of Jesus.

But I was struck as I pondered Jesus' baptism in today's text, how it looks so very unlike what we do. It wasn't done in the Jerusalem temple, with the extended family all seated in the front pews with their cameras ready. Jesus wasn't wearing a satin christening gown or a little boy's suit with a white bowtie. And I'm pretty sure there wasn't a luncheon afterwards.

Maybe our Baptist friends are a little more right. Strip you down, put you in a white robe, hold you under the water and half drown you, then pull you up sticky and dripping like a newborn.<sup>1</sup> Or the orthodox, who submerge a naked baby in a pool of water so it comes up sputtering and blinking and doing that reflexive thing babies always do.

Because baptism is serious business. Jesus knew it. John the Baptist **SURELY**, obviously knew it, when Jesus came to him to be baptized. He protests in the other gospels accounts. No sweet little rite of passage, but a revolutionary, submissive, obedient act, declaring one doesn't belong to oneself, but belongs rather to God, and will be subject to the ordering of God's spirit over and above any other outside or internal authority. Anointed for God's purpose!

I sometimes tell parents, baptism is where you acknowledge this child isn't yours, but God's – only on loan to you to nurture in God's ways. If you want them all for yourselves, don't do this. I've spoken before of my own daughter's baptism. She happened to be old enough to be verbal, so when the pastor reached to take her to baptize her, Sarah Hope screamed "No – don't – put me down, put me down!!" Perhaps she knew already by then, what she was in for if that was done to her. She would be claimed for all time by the God of the universe, no longer belonging fully or only to herself.

A colleague, reflecting on this reality proclaimed in Jesus' baptism, reminded me that later in this gospel account, Mark reports Jesus confronting two disciples who are seeking to be anointed to leadership above their peers. Jesus asks them, "Are you able

to be baptized with the baptism that I am to be baptized with?" When they respond "Yes, Lord" Jesus says "Indeed, you will be so baptized, but the kind of leadership you are seeking is not something I can or will give to you." Right hand, left hand.

The two disciples are using typical leader and authority assumptions. They assume that, anointed as king, acknowledged by God in a loud voice at His baptism, Jesus will elevate some and subjugate others. And so, as people around kings **have always done**, they begin to curry favor and jockey for position.

They assume to be higher in the pecking order is desirable; for to possess such status and authority is to be enabled to wield great force, protect oneself from dangers and secure one's own interests, comfort and personal peace.

"But," says Jesus to the power-seeking disciples, "You don't get it. You're missing the point. In this new kingdom there is a new order. In this new creation, signified by my baptism, the new king does not reign by wielding force and maintaining the threat of violence in order to keep the peace.

In this new creation, the king seeks peace not by meeting violence with even greater force, but by offering Himself as the target for the world's violence, absorbing in His own body the full force of the world's hatred, drawing the sting out of that hatred by refusing to co-operate with or perpetuate it.

Jesus is the king who lays down his life, not just for His own people, but for all people. Do we get it? The measure of one's readiness for service in the body of Christ is not one's ability to muster a majority vote, or intimidate rivals, or stack the courts, or prove one's strength in a show of force. Rather it is in one's readiness to suffer for the community, humbly absorbing hostility and bitterness and returning only reckless mercy and unflinching love.<sup>2</sup>

As a citizen, I was horrified and saddened at what happened at our nation's capital last Wednesday. Others far more eloquent than I have written about what happened, the roots from which it has grown, the grooming it received from places high and low, the fact it shouldn't have surprised us as much as it did, the threat it was to our democracy, the conspiracies it may represent, the outrage it generated, and the international embarrassment it was.

I must say I was so very grateful that within hours the machinery of our democracy was back up and running – not to be thwarted by a group of thugs, as despicable, heinous and even fatal as their actions were.

But as a Christian, what upset me most about Wednesday were the claims that God and Jesus were backing the actions. I was outraged when alongside symbols of white supremacy and hate – amid swastikas, confederate flags – were seen symbols of

Christianity. The cross of Christ raised high, the face of Jesus on placards. Signs and flags declaring **JESUS SAVES!** Along with: **GOD, GUNS & GUTS MADE AMERICA, LET'S KEEP ALL THREE.**

On the day of epiphany, when the light of Christ for ALL the world is celebrated. Epiphany –when the followers of Jesus remember another Gospel story that describes a dangerous despot of a king who was willing to dispatch death squads to kill babies rather than allow the rise of **any risk to his own power.**

Christians. Or at least some of them professing to be – baptized Christians – storming the capital. Friends, **there was NOTHING even remotely Christian about their actions.** As pastor Eugene Cho writes, in our nation, “...crowds may invoke the name of Jesus but what we witnessed on Wednesday was not the Jesus of the Gospels.”<sup>3</sup> Amen, I say. “Our faith is not something to be transacted by politicians or hooligans.”<sup>4</sup>

As colleague Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “Jesus was not killed by atheism and anarchy. He was brought down by law and order allied with religion – which is always a deadly mix. Beware those who claim to know the mind of God and are prepared to use force, if necessary, to make others conform.”

You and I, as the body of Jesus the Anointed One, have vowed to relinquish such patterns of leadership. In baptism you and I have vowed to follow in different footsteps, to exercise leadership according to a radically different model.

We have vowed to take our cues from the One whose kingship was expressed by offering Himself to the chaotic waters of the world’s sin and brokenness, absorbing in His own body the violence of the world’s hatred, and rising to new life offering not revenge and retribution, but scandalous mercy and outrageous goodwill to even His worst persecutors.<sup>5</sup>

As followers of Jesus Christ you and I know how and why leadership matters. Power and authority can be used for good – or for evil. Power and authority can foster reconciliation – or division. Power and authority can promote the interests of the many – or the interests of a few. I pray that **OUR** witness in the world may reflect the way of Jesus, which is irrevocably marked by justice, mercy, and humility, and pray that our witness may inspire our leaders to do the same.<sup>6</sup>

At baptism, I often talk about the chaos of the water at creation mentioned in the Genesis text. I look at parents and remind them they will know – if they don’t already – what chaos a child can bring to your life. Unfortunately, our children learn all too soon what chaos their parents can generate as well. Baptism is the invitation to God’s Spirit – the same Spirit that brooded over the chaotic waters of creation to continually, perpetually, eternally brood over the chaos of our lives, and make us more like Jesus every day.

In His baptism, Jesus entered into the full, unwieldy messiness of the human family.<sup>7</sup> In one watery act, He began rearranging the world's view of power, and in our baptisms, we are claimed for the same. To commit ourselves to the salvation of the whole world, claimed, cleansed and renewed by the One who calls us to risk belonging to Him first and foremost, over all prior claims of race, gender, tribe, nationality, politics, preference, or affinity. For the sake of ourselves, and the sake of the world.

May it be so. AMEN.

1. William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Epiphany, January 8, 2012.
2. Nathan Nettleton, "Anointed to Reign;" sermon for South Yarra Baptist Church, Victoria, Australia, January 10, 2021.
3. Eliana Maxim, Co-Presbyter, Seattle Presbytery, in a letter to Seattle Presbytery, January 8, 2021.
4. Pastor Eugene Cho, posted on Facebook, January 9, 2021.
5. Nettleton, op. cit.
6. Tony Sundermeier, email to First Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA; January 7, 2021.
7. Debie Thomas, "Wild Water;" Essay on JourneywithJesus.net; January 3, 2021.