

Message for Jan 24, 2021

Mark 1.4-11

It's not been that long since we heard this story. It was only about 6-7 weeks ago (at the beginning of Advent), we asked the question: who is John the Baptist?

We pictured him as this wild man in his camel hair coat and leather belt showing up in the desert. Eating locusts and honey. Calling for everyone to repent. Preaching about the one who is to follow.

We looked more closely at where he came from, the only child of devoted and doting parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah. Tradition would have had him named Zechariah, and following his father into the family business, which was the priesthood. But they name him John - meaning "God is gracious" and set him on his own path. He likely spent time with the Essenes, a strict sect of Judaism that focused on living communally, sharing what they had, working on controlling their tempers, and channeling peace. They were an early monastic order, concerned with observing the Law of Moses, the sabbath and ritual purity. They would have been content to live a quiet life of discipline and seclusion in the desert.

But not John, no, he takes another path. He goes to where the people are. He didn't appear in the desert, that was home for him. He appeared on the edge of the Jordan River. This is where the people gathered. Where the action was. He proclaims a baptism of repentance. He likely would have taken his Essene training and theology with him. The idea of a mikveh, a ritual bath to cleanse oneself of the world. Except that the Jordan River was where the folks bathed for real, and washed their dishes, and their clothes... and it's not like the water was exactly pristine.

But it wasn't about being physically or literally clean. It was about repentance. The turning of ourselves and our lives toward God. Turning toward each other. In Gathering, Ivan Gregan tells us that baptism is not just water washing away sin or saving us - it means to be immersed in the community until our outlook is influenced by the flavour

of the community. John went to where the people were. John went to preach and minister, work and live, to baptize in and with the community

It's funny though, because I have spent so much time referring to him as John the Baptist, that I never noticed, until now, that Mark refers to him as John the Baptizer. This is active. What he does is active. The ritual of baptism is not passive. We don't watch Annika be baptized. We participate in her baptism. We make commitments to her, to her parents, to support their faith journey. To ask questions and look for insight together, to share our doubt and hope with each other.

John goes to where the people are. To preach and share his faith. Jesus goes there too. To where John is, where the people are gathered. To receive ministry from John, to begin his ministry in community. None of us does this alone. We come here to be in community.

Yes, that has changed, we don't get to see each other in three dimensions. We might have to triple check to make sure that our mics are off before joining robustly in the hymns. We might miss a friendly hug from another adult. And yet, here we are. Still doing our best to be in community. Still showing up, maybe even in our pajamas. With our coffee or tea. With one another. In a fun free-for-all conversation. In worship and service.

Jesus shows us that baptism begins with Christ's willingness to step into relationship and solidarity with us, and calls us into creative community with one another. John van de Laar puts it this way: The empowerment of God's Spirit, is not just for the individual, but for the community, and for us to be creative in serving one another, and serving our neighbours. Baptism is always a mark of our belonging in God's domain, and an empowerment for bringing God's saving, restorative work into the lives of others.¹

¹ <https://sacredise.com/epiphany-1b-baptism-of-the-lord/>

So, he encourages us to celebrate this Christ's baptism and the way that God is revealed through it, but also to celebrate one another and learn to see God's glory in each other. That's easy when we look at sweet little Annika here, it's generally not too hard to see beauty and wonder and amazement in a small child. Even Stellan, whose baptism with us was not that long ago. It seems to maybe get a bit trickier as we get older...

Maybe our kids don't always listen.

Maybe our neighbours are noisy, or nosy.

Maybe our friends frustrate us, or let us down.

Maybe relationships are messy and life is hard, and we need this reminder of what it means to be in community with each other. Ministering to one another. Learning from one another. Seeing each other as blessed and beloved children of God.

With Annika's baptism, and Christ's baptism, let us remember to turn toward one another, and toward God. To let the community influence us in our living and learning together. To remember that we are called to go to where the people are. In a pandemic, this has a different kind of meaning, but we still know (maybe even more so) how important our community is. Let us renew our commitment to being the church, to being together, to offering our gifts to make a difference in the world, sharing hope, calling our leaders to justice and lifting up those who are vulnerable.

The challenge is for us to be involved practically as well as financially or philosophically, in the work for justice, peace and equity. Perhaps this week is a good time to make a new commitment to some organisation or movement which is bringing positive change, and to commit to participate in advocacy work of some kind. I invite you to consider a commitment that you might make that will live out the ritual of baptism and the promises that we just made, and get involved in practical and creative ways of bringing change.

POP

Let us pray.

We hold in God's love all across the world who yearn for deep peace and unity.

We pray for Israel and Palestine, for Syria – as rain floods the many refugee camps, and displaced people desperately search for food,

We hold in God's love all who live with anxiety, fear, dread or despair across our globe.

[include prayers requested for those struggling with Covid, or in the caring professions]

We hold in God's love this one fragile planet which we inhabit.

We pray for Indonesia experiencing earthquake and flooding on 2 separate islands, as well as the loss of an aircraft, we hold up the wildfires in Chile, Nepal and New Zealand, the blizzard in Japan

We pray for justice for the poor and the persecuted.

[include prayers for those suffering persecution or from poverty across the globe]

And we pray that the Baptised and Beloved One may remind us

and remind us and remind us

that our task is to be His hands

and hearts on this earth.

Amen.