

Genesis 1:1-5 ~ Mark 1:1-11
Where Can We Find Good News?
 January 10, 2021 ~ Baptism of the Lord ~ Reaffirmation of Baptism
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Introduction

In the Gospel According to Mark, Jesus comes with no backstory! No pedigree, no angels and shepherds, no manger or magi. Mark 1:1 heralds, “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. For Mark, the story of Jesus, the Epiphany of his presence and power on earth begins at the River Jordan. This is Jesus’ coronation, Jesus’ inauguration story. In the spirit of Mark, our lectionary gospel for 2021, I will cut to the chase here in my introduction by inviting you to listen for resonances between our first lesson from Genesis 1 and Mark 1: both are stories of God breaking through, ripping through the givenness, facing into the darkness with us, and opening up new possibilities from the deep.

Sermon

I believe that you are tuning into this service today because you want to hear and experience something real and true. After a turbulent week that has rocked our nation with events we are all still processing, I’m sure we are ready for good news that we can trust and touch. Words that will reframe, restore, renew us from the ground up. This is no time for “junk religion” of which there is plenty across the religious spectrum. This is no time for pabulum and platitudes. Easy answers will not soothe the lament in our hearts this day. We have all shared a national atrocity that threatened the core of our democracy. Even as the daily death toll from COVID continues to surge in our country, and around the world. It’s been a week!

On our way to claiming the real, the trustworthy and touchable Good News, we must begin with lament. As the Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston has put it, “I have been in Sorrow’s kitchen and licked out all the pots. Then I have stood on the peaky mountain wrapped in rainbows with a harp and a sword in my hands.”¹ We are in sorrow’s kitchen today. We each have our own “sorrow’s kitchen” but I think many of us have had a week of tossing and turning in our beds instead of sleeping. A week of hearing and seeing voices and images that make our hearts beat wildly and our heads hang low. I know mine has. We’ve seen posts on our social media sites that make our blood boil. And family political divides get sharper and deeper. We’re also tired of wearing masks and not being able to hug and hold those we love without fear of spreading the deadly coronavirus. In one way or another, its threat hangs like a cloud over all of us. Yes, we are frustrated. Yes, we are afraid.

I believe just about everyone is hurting right now from Wednesday’s devastation, even as we may disagree about what it means. Heartbreaking images of something that has never happened in the history of our country: the desecration of our sacred halls of democracy by our own citizens. This is not who we are. We can do better. That is true. However, as horrible as it was, the rampage at the Capitol is *also* part of who we are. Hate and extremism are part of our national DNA and on the rise in our country: In 2019 there were 940 active hate groups in the U.S.A. according to the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Why am I preaching about it today? Because I must. I have vowed, as all of us who have joined the Presbyterian Church have vowed, with our first membership question: "to turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world." This is the first step toward turning to Jesus as our Lord and Savior. The step into the River of life begins with eyes wide open, with truth telling, and with lament. But it does not end there. Out of death God brings resurrection. Out of chaos order. Out of night, day. Both of these scriptures bath us, wash us, and renew us with this reassuring news: God is with us in the chaos. God breaks through to heal and renew, loving each of us, as if we were God's only child. Charging us to do the same.

Yet, this ultimate Good News begins with turning from the ways of sin and renouncing evil. Honestly, when was the last time you consciously "renounced evil?" I confess it's not on my daily "to do" list. But, I believe today is a day that calls us to make good on this vow. I want to be clear that when we renounce evil, we are not presuming to judge another person as evil. We are renouncing evil words and actions, evil behavior and its consequences. At the same time we must acknowledge that *all* of us are capable of great evil as well as great good. What evil do we need to renounce today? After the events of this past week, I believe that:

- We must renounce the violent rhetoric of "stolen elections" that President Trump has spewed these last two months that made this violent attempted coup an inevitability. Wednesday's assault on the Capitol didn't come out of nowhere. This was not an aberration.
- We must renounce the violent rhetoric and actions toward Black, Brown, and Indigenous people in this country, not only in the recent past, but for the past *four hundred* years. As a white person, I was absolutely shocked and dismayed by the actions of other white persons that I saw on Wednesday, but I am realizing that Black, Brown, and Indigenous people, saw it differently. My shock, unveils another layer of my white privilege blindness. Yesterday's White mob violence was reminiscent of many similar White mobs throughout American history that have terrorized Black and Indigenous communities. As White people, we need to face this truth about our history as well as our present.
- We must renounce the white supremacy that was on full display on Wednesday as our Capitol was ransacked and our elected officials and their staffs fled for safety. While some of the Capitol police displayed stunning acts of bravery and self-sacrifice, in the line of duty, other Capitol police allowed them in, took pictures with them, and let them go home without punishment.
- We must renounce the evil that brandished Confederate Flags, Nazi symbols, and shirts that read, "6MWE" meaning, "6 Million (Jews) Wasn't Enough." Those symbols of violence and death must be unequivocally denounced as the evil that they are. This is a time to renounce evil.²

Yes, we can do better. The attempted insurrection failed and democracy did prevail in the wee hours of January 7, thanks be to God. After stirring speeches and testimonies from senators and congress people on both sides of the aisle, democracy won the day and the results of the 2020 Electoral College votes were certified.

Just as the work at the river began with repentance, so does the work of *turning* from sin and evil and *turning* toward the Love of God made known in our Risen Christ. We have to see it and say it before we can turn from it. The invitation I hear today comes in the form of a question: How can we let Jesus' way of love lead all of us, from one end of the political spectrum to the other, to repentance, reparation and reconciliation? This calls for a future based on mutual care and justice. This will take all of our spiritual power, media savvy, and our shared civic commitment to face our evil, to face our systemic sin, head on. As a Matthew 25 congregation, we have already claimed this as part of our vision. Jesus told us what to do. We must reach out to our enemies, talk to them, listen to them, love them all the way down, and back again into a new and better beloved community of God.

Many of us are thrilled at the Green Bay Packers' stunning 13-3 season. But not all of us. There are Minnesota Vikings fans among us and even some Chicago Bears fans. And I am thankful for that. How could we have sports if everyone rooted for the same team? Our responses to the 2020 Presidential election are also diverse. We did not all vote the same way here at FPC. Some of us voted for Trump and Pence. Others of us voted for Biden and Harris. I Thank God for our political diversity, as a church and as a country. Our differing perspectives make us a better church and a better country. I believe we all love our country. And here in this place, the beloved community of Christ-followers we call FPC, we *all* love Christ. In this is our hope. In this is our Good News.

But also in this is our call to hard work that takes fearless faith. Courage and faith to face our differences, is not quick or easy or flashy. This "hard yes" begins in the muck and mess. "Battles are lost with the same spirit in which they are won," as Walt Whitman wrote. The journey is a struggle—two steps forward, one step back, a detour here, circling there. We don't know why. But we do know, as Frederick Douglass, himself a former slave who won his emancipation and then committed his life to freeing others put it, "If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters."³

That is what I hope our "Reaffirmation of Baptism" will do for us today. By recommitting to ourselves to Christ, by touching water in this ritual, we can reconnect and reground ourselves in the midst of whatever chaos we are slogging through. You may be thinking, come on preacher, this little bit of water from the tap in the kitchen? Truth is, the faith of Jesus made all waters sacred. We can be cleansed of our self-hatred and redirected to the work that God is calling us: Renouncing evil and its power in the world and doubling down on our efforts to show Christ's love. Do we really believe that Love wins or not? I do. And I believe you do too. It's how God created us. It's in our spiritual DNA. We were all created to love God, self, and neighbor. Beginning again, today.

I will close with the beautiful prayer Senate Chaplain Barry Black prayed moments after the Congress certified Joe Biden's electoral college victory,

We deplore the desecration of the United States Capitol Building, the shedding of innocent blood, the loss of life, and the quagmire of dysfunction that threaten our democracy. These tragedies have reminded us that words matter and that the power of life and death is in the tongue. We have been warned that eternal vigilance continues to be freedom's price. Lord, you have helped us remember that we need to see in each other a common humanity that reflects your image. You have strengthened our resolve to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies domestic as well as foreign. Use us to bring healing and unity to our hurting and divided nation and world. Thank you for what you have blessed our lawmakers to accomplish in spite of threats to liberty. Bless and keep us. Drive far from us all wrong desires, incline our hearts to do your will and guide our feet on the path of peace. And God bless America. We pray in your sovereign name, amen.

¹ Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, as quoted in Bishop Michael Curry, *Love is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times*, (Penguin Random House: New York, NY, 2020), p. 50. Curry).

² Adapted from Laura Nile Tuell, Associate Pastor at Southminster Presbyterian Church, Dayton, OH, Facebook Post, January 7, 2020.

³ *Ibid*, Curry, *Love is the Way*, the Whitman and Douglass quotes, and the gist of this paragraph I took from p.121 of Bishop Curry's book. The Frederick Douglass quote is from "West India Emancipation," a speech delivered at Canandaigua, New York, August 4, 1857.