

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling

First Presbyterian Church

January 7, 2024

Mark 1:4-11

Baptism of Our Lord Sunday

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

"Jesus, John, Baptism, and You"

The start of something new – a new year, a new job, a new school, a new relationship, a new home, the birth of a new child – are often good occasions to take stock of one's life, to take a moment to look around, and to reconnect to the reality of what is now. In this new year, our first Sunday service together in 2024, I would like to pose a question to us as the faithful Christians of First Presbyterian Church: What are we called to become, to begin afresh in this place, as a faith community today in 2024? This question is the basis for a series of questions that we will be asking a lot over the course of this year as we explore who we are now and more importantly what we are called to become as the people of God here in this corner of God's creation.

This is not, by the way, a hypothetical question. I've tasked the Session with answering this question, and I'm asking all of you to come alongside them and give your input too. What is First Presbyterian Church called to become, to begin afresh in this place in 2024?

Some of you were around when we asked this question 5 years ago in our Lent series “Seeking the Heart of God in the Heart of the City” when various community leaders spoke to us about their work and how we might get involved in it. Out of that successful series our relationship with Washington Elementary School started, and after hearing many of our speakers talk about the Arts, we took a critical eye to our arts ministry, particularly the theater, and began to transform that ministry. We also formed a partnership with the Blessings in a Backpack organization and provided meals to all of the children at Washington Elementary School. We did good, important work.

But some of our work was waylaid by the pandemic and thus set aside. However – and this is really important to note and keep in mind – we continued to do vital ministry because we responded to what was happening around us and in our community. None of us could have predicted the racial reckoning thrust upon us after George Floyd’s murder or the protests that erupted around us; nor could we have predicted a worldwide pandemic that would force people to stay home and businesses to shutter. But instead of sticking our heads in the sand, we responded with our love bombs of area businesses, our sacred conversations, our Tough Talks, and the like. At the same time, we also knew it was important to remain grounded in our faith, so we pioneered worship in parking lots before anyone else was doing it when we worshipped on Good Friday at the Macy’s parking lot at Glenbrook Mall (remember that?), or our Christmas Eve service in our parking lot here – remember those electronic candles and how you all raised them from your car windows during Silent Night? Or we rang our steeple bell over 200 times on All Saints Sunday to recognize the 200,000 deaths from Covid.

Friends, I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again until I’m blue in the face, but all ministry is contextual. We must continue to have our finger on the pulse of what is happening around us so we not only remain relevant, but also faithful to the work of the Gospel. Our mission to transform lives through the love of Jesus Christ may stay the same but HOW we live that mission and deliver that mission changes. It has to change. The world has changed. The pandemic changed things. It changed how we work, how we gather, how we go to school, and how we worship, just to name a few. For example, we had about 1000 people worship with us on Christmas Eve between our morning and evening services. 1000 people! This is fantastic! And ½ of them were online.

Things have changed. And we can either stick our heads in the sand and ignore it and thus die a slow death, or answer the question “What is First Presbyterian Church called to become, to begin afresh in this place in 2024?”

But we’re not going to make changes just for the sake of change, nor do I care to follow the latest fad or do something just because another church is doing it. What we do needs to make sense for who we are – so history matters – and where we are – again, context is important.

The Session and staff are engaged in a study of the book “The Art of Gathering”, which asks the simple but profound question “What is the purpose of our gathering?” It goes without saying that we do a lot of gathering here: worship, meetings, Bible studies, fellowship, concerts, shows, gallery openings. I’m out or could be out almost every night of the week with the gatherings we hold here. But what is the purpose behind all of them? This is a critical question in our post-pandemic world.

In conjunction with that, the Session and other leaders will gather in February to begin answering the question “Who are we?”, and as they grapple with that question, your participation in the process is critical. we’re going to host in Lent a “Seeking the Heart of God in the Heart of the City 2.0”, and I hope you will attend to hear what is happening in our community and how we can be a part of that. I want you to come. I need you to come.

The Lent series is important. We need to hear from community leaders what is happening, and we need to hear from you about what you think the church should do with the information we hear. Because what we decide to do must align with who we are or aspire to be. I also encourage you to read the book “The Art of Gathering” and take part in one of the classes I plan on leading on it. I want and need all hands on deck because friends, God is ALWAYS creating something new; God is ALWAYS moving us forward in creation so that we will become more fully who God has in mind for us to become.

Which leads me, finally, to our gospel reading for today.

We’ll journey through Mark’s gospel for most of the year, so you should know up front that Mark wastes no time. There’s an urgency to Mark’s gospel, a sense of immediacy, a sense that *now is the time*. There’s no birth story in Mark, no

shepherds or angels or magi. There's only the beginning of the Gospel and the beginning of Jesus' ministry. That's a lot of beginnings.

But in the midst of that there's also something very odd, something that actually alludes to the end of Mark's gospel. As Jesus comes up out of the waters of baptism, signifying the start of his ministry and new life, he sees the heavens torn apart. The word Mark uses here is the Greek word "Schizo", which means torn apart. It's the word from which we get our English words "scissors" and "schism" or "schizophrenia". "Schizo" means to "split," to "rend," to "tear apart" or "rip open." It has almost a violent connotation. So the heavens were being "split wide open," "torn apart," when Jesus was baptized.

But here's the real oddity: the only other time Mark uses that word schizo is at the end of Jesus' life when he breathes his last. "Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn apart (schizo) in two, from top to bottom." So from the very start of Mark's gospel is the idea that baptism is linked to death.

Initially you may think that is very odd. After all, that's not how we think of baptism. We think of newborns and young children or those to new faith – new, new, new – and loving scenes of family members gathered to witness the baptism, the pastor carrying the newly baptized baby around the sanctuary, and singing "I was There To Hear Your Boring Cry."

But friends, in our baptisms we proclaim that we are buried with Christ in his death. What that means is that we need to die to the old way of existence before we can put on, accept and be recipients of the new way, the new life, the new beginning that only Jesus can give us.

What this means is that in order for new life, for a resurrection to happen, there's got to be a death. You can't claim the new life God intends and keep on doing the old things. It doesn't work that way.

After his baptism, Jesus constantly struggled with people who would resist God and God's ways. His faith would be put to the test many times, most of the time by people who resisted his message because they didn't want to make the changes in their lives that Jesus requires us to make. They didn't want to love their neighbor more than themselves; they didn't want to drop their nets and

follow Jesus; they didn't want to sell everything they had and give it to the poor. Why? Because those things are hard to do. I'm guessing there will be people here who resist what is happening, because there is always resistance to change and change is hard. But while some resistance is good because it challenges us to be clear on our purpose; there can be resistance which is damaging to the body of Christ and cause harm. But as I've said countless times, you have everything you need to live into the future God is calling you to embrace, and you are far too magnificent of a church not to.

One minister likens change to coming about on his sailboat. Coming about isn't easy, because it involves shifting the rudder and letting go and pulling in the jib sheet. When you're pulling on the jib sheet the boom swings from side to side, and if the sails don't fill with wind the boat lists from side to side. Any sailor knows its tricky work and it needs to be done quickly and correctly. Because if you don't do it quickly and correctly your boat can tip over, which is no fun-not to mention dangerous.

I know this because when I was about 10 I was sailing with my Dad at Spofford, and we tipped over in the middle of the lake. To this day whenever I'm in a sailboat and we have to come about, I get nervous-because I know that changing course can be difficult.

In our baptisms God calls us to move in a new direction, and to lead a new life that is pleasing to God. That's not always easy to do. Committing to a new thing or a new direction can be difficult, because it involves some letting go and pulling in and changing course. But God is now here, Mark tells us. God is now loose in the world, and walks with us on our journeys, fills our sails with wind, and helps us along the way.

Thanks be to God.

Let us pray. Lord, help us live into the promise of our baptism. Help us to live courageously and joyfully. Take us where it may so long as that is where you need us to be. In Jesus' name we ask. Amen.

