

**TAKE A DIP; RENEW YOUR BAPTISM**  
Mark 1:4-11

Kelly Boyte Brill  
Avon Lake UCC  
10 January 2021

Which of these stories do you need the most today? Is it this story of the creation? “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light...and there was evening and there was morning, the first day.” **Water** is there from the beginning, and there’s also **order**. Every day something is created: the sky, the dry land, plants, the sun, the moon, the stars, animals and all living creatures. **Each day begins with God, each day ends with God.** And God sees that it is all good. There is **reassurance** in the story of the creation in Genesis 1. It’s reassuring to see that God is present, that God is in charge. **There is not chaos but there is order. It is good.**

Maybe you need to remember the story of Noah - at first the water creates destruction, but then God places in the sky a sign of **hope** - a rainbow - a sign that **God can be trusted.**

After the week we've had, after the year we've had, hear the words of Psalm 46: "God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though its mountains shake in the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. There is a **river** whose **streams** make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the most high. **God is in the midst of the city**, it shall not be moved. God will help it when the morning dawns. The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter, God utters God's voice, the earth melts. The Lord of Hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge."

That river whose streams make glad the city of God...it appears again in the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation. Maybe this is the image your heart longs for today - the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God. Here's what Revelation says, "On either side of the river is the tree of life, with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the **healing of the nations.**"

There is water throughout the Bible, from the very beginning of the book until its very end. Sometimes the water imagery reminds us of its

power - even its destructive power - and sometimes it reminds us of the life-giving presence of God.

Water is necessary for our lives. We cannot live without clean drinking water; our bodies absolutely require it. Water cleanses us and refreshes us. I don't know anyone who isn't drawn to the water in some way - maybe you like to swim, maybe you kayak on the lake or maybe you love to boat, maybe your favorite vacation spot is the beach, or maybe you just like soaking in the tub. Staring at the waves in the ocean is mesmerizing. We begin life in the water and we want to return to it again and again. Water calls to something deep within us.

We see this pull towards the water in the life of Jesus. He spends most of his life near the Sea of Galilee, a beautiful calm body of water that really should be called a lake. When Jesus needed to get away from the crowds, when he longed to be alone, when it was time for prayer, he often sought solace on this body of water. The water must have nourished his spirit, calmed and renewed him.

The gospel of Mark begins, not with the birth of Jesus, but with the story of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus. Mark describes John as an eccentric character - he wore clothes made of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. This wasn't

the way most people dressed and ate; otherwise, Mark would have no reason to make a point of it. John is one of those persons who lived on the border, on the margins, just slightly outside the norms. You may know people a little like John - someone odd, someone who doesn't quite fit in. Yet Mark says he had a message and a mission and a following, a huge following. Remember what Beau read?

“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.”

To John, the baptismal waters were for cleansing, the washing away of one's sins. It was an experience many people wanted evidently, and who wouldn't? Who doesn't want a fresh start, a new beginning? Isn't it why we like the new year, new calendars, new year's resolutions? We can put away the Christmas decorations, straighten the house, we can clean out closets and haul bags of items to give away to the Thrift Shop, and that all feels good - but what do you do about the baggage you carry around internally? Those tapes you play in your head when you're feeling down, memories of the times you hurt those you love the most, memories of your

failures, feelings of guilt, shame, regret? What if you could rid yourself of all of that? Most of us would travel pretty far for that kind of baptism.

But what in the world is **Jesus** doing there? Jesus, the Messiah, the one for whom John was preparing. Jesus, the Messiah, the one whom John said would be so much more powerful than he, the one who would baptize with the Spirit. Jesus, the Messiah, the one who had no need of repentance or cleansing. That Jesus came and he stood in line with all of the others. Mark indicates he didn't make a big deal of it. He didn't preach as he waited. He didn't call any attention to himself. Jesus just stood there, waiting. And then, after it happened, he just stood there, watching above and listening to God's voice.

Why was Jesus there? Maybe he lined up there with everybody else because frankly this is what incarnation is all about: the proclamation that God in Jesus is taking our side, not content to be separate from us, but desiring to join us, to be one **with** us in all that we are and in all that we do.

Perhaps the gospel of Mark wants us to know at our own baptisms, at the baptisms that we witness, that Jesus himself also did this. Jesus himself stood in line, shoulder to shoulder with broken people like you and me. Jesus himself went down into the murky waters to signal cleansing and forgiveness and new creation. Perhaps Jesus was baptized that day so he

would be all of who we are, in order that we might become more like who he is.

And who is he? God shouts it loud and clear, for all to hear. “And just as he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.” And here’s my favorite verse, maybe my favorite in all of Mark: “And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased.’”

It’s as if God is saying, “In case you ever wondered, Jesus, now you know for sure. This is who you are. I’m letting you know, and I’m letting all of these people know.”

And immediately after his baptism, Jesus spends 40 days in the wilderness and then his ministry begins.

Baptism is a sign, a symbol, of our identity as God’s beloved children. In a case of God’s good timing, just the other day Tim Schulz found a picture of the day we installed the baptismal font in our sanctuary. It was 15 years ago. When we designed this sanctuary, this was one of the first features we decided upon. Having a baptismal font at the entrance of the sanctuary is an ancient Christian practice, but not a common one in the Protestant church. I love the symbolism of the font at the entrance of the church, a reminder that we enter the Christian life through baptism. From

the baptismal font you look directly towards the communion table, and the two sacraments of our church are both central in our worship space. The first year we worshiped in this space, I answered a lot of questions about the baptismal font. Children are curious about the font and want to touch the water. Several parents discouraged that, thinking it rude or inappropriate, so I said, week after week, “**Let** the children touch the water. Let’s **all** touch the water. Remember your baptism. Remember you are loved. Remember God loves you.”

Because those words God says to Jesus are spoken to us as well, all of us, when we emerge from the waters of baptism. “You are my beloved child; in you I am well-pleased.”

As we begin this new year, so very aware of all of the old problems we have brought with us, let us remember God’s love for us, God’s intention that we live with meaning and purpose. Hear the words God is saying to you, to you personally, let them soak into you - let them seep into those parts of you where you harbor self-doubt, let them wash away the other messages that may live inside of you - messages that tell you you’re not good enough, that you’re too old, that you’ve made too many mistakes.

Baptism is the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Think of that. The incredible work that Jesus does in just three years’ time, the stories he told

that are still being told, the people he touched, the way he lived that has impacted our world for 2,000 years — it all started here. With Jesus emerging from the baptismal waters and hearing God say, “you are my beloved child; in you I am well-pleased.” Those words were Jesus’ foundation, his touchstone. Anytime he faced adversity, anytime he questioned himself, he’d take his little boat out on the Sea of Galilee and he would pray and listen and listen and pray until he could hear those words again and believe them. “Oh yes, that is who I am. My life has meaning and purpose.”

He would not have been able to launch into a ministry of love if he didn’t love himself. He wouldn’t have been able to preach love to others if he didn’t start from that place of deep acceptance.

You and I are living through a time of great adversity. Even though most of us watching this service today have a secure roof over our heads and food to eat, still our lives have been turned upside down in many ways over the past ten months. This week we witnessed one of those events that we will remember the rest of our lives. At some level, we are all traumatized and grieving, and grief takes a toll on us: physically, emotionally and spiritually. Let these words begin to heal you. Hear them

until you believe them. “You are my beloved child; I am so well-pleased with you.”

This is the historic Middle Collegiate Church in the East Village neighborhood of New York City:

Their sanctuary was built in 1892, and became a gorgeous worship space with Tiffany windows and a state-of-the-art digital organ, but the congregation was established in the 1600's. It has a vibrant, inclusive ministry.

In early December, in the middle of Advent, in a pandemic year, the church caught fire. The fire gutted the church building.

At the end of December, only a few weeks after the shock and horror of this incident, the church's pastor, Jacqui Lewis, wrote this: “Thinking about grace as we end this wretched year. What if - instead of new. year's resolutions - we just spent a night listening to the divine whisper: ‘You are loved. You are enough. Your grief is holy. Be gentle and release guilt you feel for how you traveled through suffering.’”

It seems to me that it would be wise for us in this year to try to imitate the rhythm of Jesus' life. Here's what I mean by that. Find a way - whatever way works for you - to incorporate some stillness into your life, enough stillness that will allow you to hear God's voice reassuring you that

you are beloved, that you are accepted and that you are not alone. When you have bathed in that grace, then you are ready to go out into the world and live as a disciple of Jesus - facing the challenges of your every day life with strength, sharing loving kindness, sowing seeds of compassion and forgiveness, advocating for justice, feeding the hungry - doing the work of the church - and then when you start to feel depleted, refill yourself again. Maybe water can be a reminder for you of God's message of your belovedness. This rhythm will be life-giving for us and for our world that is so broken, so wounded. The world needs us but it only needs us when we're healthy, when we're centered, when we're ready. We don't serve the world because we need accolades or we need to get our needs met. That kind of loving is dysfunctional and will only lead to more problems. First we accept that we are loved, then we are ready to love God's world.

\*Some notes for this sermon are from a sermon by the Rev. Shannon Kershner.