

Baptism into the Margins

Mark 1: 4 - 11

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The Community Church of Sebastopol - United Church of Christ
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I.

Good morning, beloved.

We gather here on the first Sunday after Epiphany, traditionally known as Baptism of Christ Sunday.

On this day the church remembers the story of Jesus' baptism and ponders its meaning for the church and the wider world.

On this Sunday we remember our own baptism, the outward and visible sign of the inward and invisible movement of God's grace, a grace binding us to one another and to all creation as the Body of Christ.

But on this Baptism of Christ Sunday in 2021 we must begin by confessing that our body is broken, bruised, and beaten.

Our collective body bears the bruises of racism, borne out before us most recently by the angry siege laid upon the nation's Capitol, and many state Capitols, by white nationalists egged on by a racist, demented, and opportunistic president and his supporters.

It happened on the day Christians call the Epiphany, a word that means showing forth.

While we tend to associate that showing forth with something positive and life-giving, this Epiphany we were shown something malevolent and death-dealing.

And it wasn't just the seditious crowd, nor the politicians whose complicity made this moment possible, it was also the stark contrast between the way the Capitol police treated the invaders and the way the National Guard treated Black Lives Matter demonstrators in the Spring of last year.

An epiphany indeed.

II.

A podcast I listen to had an episode with the caption "Two Americas." Above the caption were two images, one of Rev. Raphael Warnock, and the other of a white nationalist in the Capitol building.

Two Americas.

The white nationalist assault happened on the day after the pastor of Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, the church where Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. served, was elected as the first black person to represent Georgia in the U.S. Senate, along with a Jewish man who interned with civil rights leader and congressperson John Lewis.

This is the contrast of two Americas, an America of diversity and freedom, and an America of white privilege and control.

As Rev. William Barber reflected, what happened at the Capitol on Epiphany was un-American, but not non-American.

This isn't just about America. It is also about Christianity.

Many of the violent right-wing nationalists who stormed the Capitol building claimed to be Christian.

They proclaimed Jesus with their mouths, and they wore his name on their clothes.

They used and abused Jesus' name to justify their racist violence and did so without irony or shame.

Perhaps our burden is not only to consider two Americas,
but two Christianities,

one toward liberation and one toward slavery,

one toward truth and one toward fantasy,

one toward unconditional love and one toward intolerant hate.

On this day when we remember Jesus' baptism and our own, we must wrestle with the fact that many of our fellow Christians want to use Christianity to justify their racist, nationalist, misogynist, homophobic, and transphobic ideologies.

This is not a foregone conclusion of Christianity, but it is a conclusion at which many have arrived, and it is part of the legacy of America.

On this Baptism of Christ Sunday, as we remember our own baptismal vows, we must choose again to follow again in the way of the one who embodied God's justice which rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

III.

This is Year B of the Revised Common Lectionary and the prescribed version of the story of Jesus' baptism for this year is from the Gospel of Mark.

Mark was the first account of Jesus to be written, and was essentially the creation of new genre called gospel.

Mark's gospel, you may remember, moves fast.

It's terse, sparse on details, heavy on verbs.

One of Mark's favorite words is "Immediately."

There is urgency to the story of Jesus as Mark tells it.

In the verses we hear today, we are introduced to John the baptizer with a few details, but no dialogue, only proclamation:

"The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me," John says.

Of course, the one who is coming is Jesus, but Mark doesn't come out and say it.

He just has Jesus show up to be baptized by John in the waters of the Jordan.

Let's remember that this baptism that John offered was a strange new take on an old ritual.

Baptism in the first century was a rite primarily reserved for those entering the Jewish faith from the outside.

It was a rite of initiation.

It was practiced in a variety of places, but primarily in Jerusalem close to the temple.

It was an authoritative ritual that made someone an insider rather than an outsider.

It cleansed someone of all former impurities so that they could begin a life of purity.

It gave someone a privileged status.

But John practiced baptism differently.

He offered baptism far from Jerusalem in the wilderness and so it is significant that the text tells us, with a bit of exaggeration, that all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him.

In other words, John's was a popular movement of people from the center of religious power in Jerusalem out the wilderness.

And John's baptism was not performed by a priest or other religious leader but by John, dressed in simple camel's hair and a leather belt, eating a poor person's meal of protein-rich locusts and sugar-rich honey. Finally, John's baptism was not about getting clean, but about making a new start called repentance.

I'm not sure if you're following my description, so let me try to make it plain.

Baptism was an exclusive rite. John's baptism was for everyone.

Baptism was authoritative. John practiced baptism without authority.

Baptism was about purity. John's baptism was about returning to God and seeking transformation.

From the center to the wilderness, from the authorities to a wild man, from cleanliness to righteousness.

This is the baptism John offered and this is the baptism Jesus accepted.

IV.

Can I be real with you now?

I got to this point in my sermon and I got stuck.

I got stuck on the question of whether the Christians who stormed the Capitol are really Christians.

I hesitate to say they are not Christians because I have been told that I am not Christian, that I am not who my Baptism says I am.

There are many different expressions of Christianity which makes it, arguably, the most diverse global community in history.

But we also need to be able to distinguish expressions of Christianity that reflect the self-giving nature of Christ from expressions that seek to self-justify and exclude.

As I thought about it, and prayed about it, I came to the conclusion that I won't deny the Baptism of my fellow Christians, no matter how misguided I think they may be.

By that Baptism, we all belong to one body, one humanity.

But Baptism isn't a one-time magical event. We live out our baptismal vows and in so doing we shape our lives.

And if we look at Jesus' baptism and the way it shaped his ministry from that point forward, we have to conclude that Christianity is not an exclusive club.

Jesus baptism, which is our Baptism, does not make us insiders.

It makes us outsiders.

Through Jesus' Baptism in the waters of the wilderness, God became an outsider, God became human.

Therefore, we can never wear our Baptism as a badge of privilege, can't stitch it on a flag or a sweatshirt, can align it with any exclusive ideology based on race or nation.

Somewhere I read that "Baptism is the ordination of the laity."

That's just a fancy way of saying that in Baptism we all become ministers, and a minister is one who serves others.

When we use our Baptism to justify our cherished ideologies, we do violence to the body of Christ and to the world God so loves.

One of my favorite quotes is by Kathleen Norris who wrote, "I often think that if I ever become a Christian, I'll be the last to know."

I think that's the way to view our Baptism, as a sign and seal that we are claimed by God for service to others, but also as a destination toward which we are always heading and can never decide whether we have in fact arrived.

Perhaps the same could be said for America, that it is an ideal we have only begun to realize.

As a Christian, I believe there were two epiphanies this week, one happened in Georgia on Tuesday and the other happened at the Capitol on Wednesday.

May we pray that the true Epiphany came a day early this year. Amen.