

NEW TESTAMENT READING: Mark 1:4-11

4John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5And 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...[He proclaimed] 8I have baptized you with water; but [One greater than I] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

9In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10And 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. 11And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

This is the Word of the Lord. THANKS BE TO GOD

OLD TESTAMENT READING: Genesis 1:1-5 pg 1 OT

1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2 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.

3 Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. 4 And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

“God Speaks Life”

On this high and holy day in the Church, the Baptism of the Lord Sunday, the day that we ordain and install the ruling elders of our congregation, it is particularly wonderful to consider both of our Old and New Testament readings together, noting their common theme. One of the texts, of course, is the Gospel reading of Jesus’ baptism and the other, the other, is from the very first chapter of Genesis. With the Spirit’s guidance, let’s discover the commonality and the message for us therein!

In the Genesis text, the beautiful, poetic, Genesis text, God is proclaimed as Creator of all that is. The world was not self-made. From an untamed and threatening void, GOD created. The Scripture says, God’s Spirit “*moved over the waters,*” or more accurately, God’s Spirit “*danced over the face of the deep*”.¹ And then, then, the text says this: “God spoke, “*Let there be...and there was.*” (*REPEAT*) New life came into being via God’s creative word, the Logos, Jesus!² God spoke and there was life.

Now, in the Markan text, the day that Jesus was baptized by John is described. “*The heavens were torn apart open*”, it says, and the Holy Spirit once again “moved” over the waters, this time, the waters of the River Jordan. And God said, “*This is my beloved Son*”. And what happened? New order in the chaos...new life in Christ, came into being for all who believe. God spoke and once again there was life, new life.

You see, when God in Jesus stepped into the Jordan, he identified with us...completely. When he chose to be baptized by the repentance-preaching, fire-breathing John, he did not do so because he needed to be cleansed of his sins, but because we needed to see that he, who seemed to be an ordinary flesh and blood human was also divine. The voice from heaven made this clear...He was God’s Son. We needed to see that he was God incarnate and had come to be one with us, to stand shoulder to shoulder with us, to share our earthly lives and lots. If we had not understood this in the stable at Bethlehem, we see it here in the Jordan. We see that he came to join the ranks with us, suffering sinners, and through his gracious and sacrificial love, to

¹Valerie Bridgeman. “*Commentary on Gen 1:1-5*” https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3551. (accessed 1/6/2018).

²Wil Willamon. “*Caretakers of God’s Creative Word*” <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/8651/january-7-2018-caretakers-of-gods-creation>. (accessed 1/6/2018).

eventually go to the cross and then to be raised on our behalf. In solidarity with him, we can be released from lives of guilt and shame, from fear of eternal condemnation, literally from death and we can be released to live lives which are forgiven and free, lives which are confident, hopeful and joyous, lives which are NEW!

I've read these words to you before, but I'll read them again, fabulous words of the 4th c theologian, Athanasius,: *"Because Jesus so completely joined himself with the mortal flesh, made known in his baptism, his reversal of death is offered to all others who are also flesh. We are exalted through our unity with God the Son as we "appropriate his body" and participate by faith not only in his death but in his risen new life through the Holy Spirit."*³ Yes, friends, God speaks life.

Now, let's go on. Jesus also stepped into the Jordan to show us something else. That is, that we need not DO anything to be loved. In his baptism, Jesus simply...and, in fact, rather passively...stood in the waters and RECEIVED the gift of the Holy Spirit and the gift of God's favor. How much he must have longed to hear those divine words claiming him as a beloved son and a pleasure to God. Think how much strength he'd have drawn from them.⁴ Think how we too long to hear our Creator's words of acceptance, identity, and blessing.

They're powerful words spoken to us who really CAN do nothing to earn God's favor, who are called, chosen, claimed even before we are born.... *"You are my child ..., ..,,,,,, and I, the Lord, am pleased with you....* powerful words which shape us, which transform us from people who feel so unworthy to ones who know we are treasured ...powerful words which transform us from people who lack confidence and are afraid to ones who are secure in our promised inheritance and can face the world with a god-like calm...powerful words which give us, once again, new life.

The great Martin Luther was reportedly plagued at times by a sense of unworthiness and despair. To drive back those demons, he kept an inscription over his desk that read,

³ Athanasius, "On the Incarnation," in *Introduction to the History of Christianity: Apostolic Era to 1650*, Vol 1, (Austin: Abel's Copies, 2009), 120.

⁴ David Lose. "Powerful Words for a New Year" in *In the Meantime*. <http://www.davidlose.net/2018/01/epiphany-1-b-powerful-words-for-a-new-year/>. (accessed 1-6-18).

*“Remember, you have been baptized.” Often, he would touch his forehead, where the cross had been drawn, where the priest had said, “You are a child of God and you belong to Jesus Christ forever,” to remind himself, “Martin, you have been baptized.”*⁵ You know, I recommend that you take a moment today, on this high, and holy day, to touch your forehead, and remind yourself that you are a child of God. You might want to do it as you come forward for communion. Touch the water from the font, with your finger and then your forehead. Baptized or not yet baptized, you are a beloved child of God.

James Autry, American poet and journalist, once wrote a poem called, “Baptism”. It goes like this: *There is something about putting people under the water and raising them up in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, something that makes people cry. That makes them want everything to be alright. That makes them want to leave this place and be better, to immerse themselves in their lives. And somehow be washed clean of all the things they should not have done and still should not want to do. That’s it. Not the other things...the star in the east, the treasures in heaven, or any of the old stories, not even life after death. It’s only “to be new again”.*⁶ Yes, friends, Our Creator God speaks life.

So, what do we do now? What message does the Spirit have for us to do today? How are we to respond? Well, could it be that the new life God speaks is made available to us by virtue of our unity with Jesus and we need to go out and seize it? Could be that be it? Yes, when God’s spirit moved over the waters of Creation, and of the Jordan, we witness his holy power. We see Jesus standing there in the water, shoulder to shoulder with us, puny, weak humans, and we realize that what belongs to him is being given to us. We too will be “empowered” in our lives. We can take on the problems at home or in the community, the tragedies in our souls. We can be bold to make a difference in the concerns of the world or our personal lives. We can live forgiven and free and be INSTRUMENTS of his peace, BEARERS of his love, PARTICIPANTS in the divine work of bringing the Kingdom. Hear the words of the apostle Paul, *“We, who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death... Therefore, we have been*

⁵ Joanna Adams. *“God Believes in You”*. http://day1.org/1678-god_believes_in_you. (accessed 1-7-17).

⁶ James Autry. *“Baptism”* In: *Nights Under a Tin Roof*. (Oxford, MS: Yoknapatawpha Press;1983).

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buried with him by baptism, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might WALK in newness of life.

Mark 1:4-11; Gen 1:1-5

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Walk in newness of life. This is what our response needs to be. This is what those who are coming today to be ordained and installed are doing. They are responding to their baptismal call, renouncing sin, declaring Jesus as their Lord and Savior and acknowledging the fire of the Spirit that compels them to love Christ's church and his disciples. They are endeavoring to live lives purposefully and energized for service with what they and others have identified as gifts for church leadership. They have been recognized by this congregation as spiritually mature and committed to Presbyterian principles of government. They have received training, have been examined and approved by Session. They do not have "special or higher" qualities, or in ordination are being placed "above" or "better" than. (*SLOWLY*) Rather, through their ordination promises, they ground themselves in a posture of servitude, as did Christ in his baptism, and they pledge to support the people of the church as they live out the fullness of their baptismal covenant.

As the congregation sings now the first and third verse of hymn #482, "Baptized in Water", I ask Charles Pasco, Grace Hoy and Marley Ngwa to come forward as well as Clerk, Kate Peirce-Burleson.