

Turn and turn again

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

Baptism of Jesus - January 15, 2022

Texts: Isaiah 42:1-10, Psalm 29, Matthew 3:13-17

SCRIPTURE READING Isaiah 42:1-4, 9

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights;

I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.

He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street;

a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.

He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth;

and the coastlands wait for his teaching....

See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare;

before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

RESPONSIVE READING Psalm 29

The voice of the Holy One is over the waters;

the God of glory thunders, the Holy One, over mighty waters.

The voice of the Holy One is powerful;

the voice of the Holy One is full of majesty.

The voice of the Holy One breaks the cedars;

the Holy One breaks the cedars of Lebanon.

God makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox.

The voice of the Holy One flashes forth flames of fire.

The voice of the Holy One shakes the wilderness;

the Holy One shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

The voice of the Holy One causes the oaks to whirl,

and strips the forest bare; and in God's temple all cry, "Glory!"

The Holy One sits enthroned over the flood;

the Holy One sits enthroned as ruler forever.

May the Holy One give strength to the people!

May the Holy One bless the people with peace!

GOSPEL READING Matthew 3:13-17

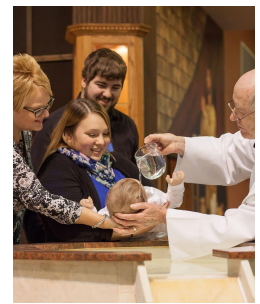
Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' Word of God, Word of life. TBTG

As you remember, we are taking this season of Epiphany to talk about epiphanies, “aha” moments that open us to the light of God already in the world, shining out of people and situations where we least expect it.



Also today, we celebrate the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptizer in the River Jordan. I heard on the radio that Christians gathered this morning to worship on the East Bank of the Jordan at the spot where it's supposed to have happened. The place is considered almost as holy as the place where he was born and the place where he died. Not only was it the first gathering there since covid, but the site was recently cleared of tens of thousands of landmines, making it safe for pilgrims. Why so holy? And what's the connection between Jesus at the Jordan and some poor infant getting a public bath? Are they the same? Are they different?

Well, what is baptism anyway? First, it's God announcing to you as God did to Jesus, “You are my beloved child.” Yes, but you were that already, right? So was Jesus. Then, too, baptism assures us of forgiveness when we sin. True. But Jesus never sinned, and I doubt that baby has messed up too badly yet, either.



Baptism also says publicly you're part of the family of God, with people around to teach you right from wrong as you grow up. Many people believe that when you are baptized, you share in Jesus' death and his resurrection. Baptized, you don't need to be afraid of death anymore. Then there's the ever-popular opinion that baptism is a sort of a life-after-death insurance policy that guarantees you a spot in heaven if you pay your premiums regularly on Christmas and Easter. Of course, if you pay every week, you get a better seat. (Just kidding. Not true by any stretch.)



The point is, though, baptism means many things to many people. Differences of opinion have caused huge rifts among Christians, which seems tragic to me - like landmines planted among believers. What I want to say today is that baptism can be an epiphany - an “aha” - that can happen to us every day. Times change, practices change, *we* change, but God's love never wavers. How would Jesus navigate the world today? I showed this greeting card to a friend and she laughed and came back with this: “Before Jesus left heaven to be born, he asked his Father why he had to go and when he could come back, because he'd miss heaven. The Father told him, ‘It won't be for long, just from Christmas to Easter.’ Jesus said, ‘What's Easter?’”

I for one don't believe Jesus was born with his life's plan imprinted on his brain. Many Christians believe that at his baptism he received his call and was filled with spiritual power to complete his work. I like the idea that Jesus kept figuring it out as he went along, pretty much like us. John advertised a baptism of repentance, but repentance isn't just apologizing for

messing up; in Hebrew, the word is “to turn,” to turn again to God, to *return* to the right path if you’ve wandered off. Remembering baptism can be a daily returning, a daily epiphany. Or we might say, re-tuning: as Steve Garnaas-Holmes points out, “Even Yo-Yo Ma needs to tune up. To repent is to turn to God. It’s not a one time thing. We need to turn with every breath, keep tuning in, tuning up with every note.” Even Jesus needed to do that.



With that in mind, let me share my epiphany story from this past week. I got to attend a hybrid workshop on Zoom called Bridging the Divide, led by a group called Braver Angels. It’s about connecting with people who disagree with you - about clearing the landmines that can too easily explode if we say the wrong thing. The leaders teach you 1) how to listen without taking offense, 2) how to speak your truth without giving offense, and 3) how to “agree to disagree” without destroying the relationship. They gave us talking points on two hot-button issues, gun violence and immigration and we paired off to practice, onsite or online.

Never say God doesn’t know better than me what I need. My breakout partner was an interesting man named Dainis. He Zoomed in from Latvia (in pink on the map). Dainis grew up when Latvia was part of the Soviet Union; about a fourth of the population is still ethnic Russian, carried over from those days. As you know, Latvia shares a border with Russia, but belongs to the EU and NATO. It’s a highly developed, democratic country, and ranks toward the top in quality of life, human rights and civil liberties. But Dainis began life under Soviet rule. He was drafted into the Soviet army. Later, he served in the Latvian army as well.



About immigration, he had this to say: “Ukrainians are pouring into Latvia, fleeing the invasion. Special accommodations have been made to welcome them. Of course, Latvia supports Ukraine, but with our Russian population, and now the Ukrainians, I’m concerned about the country being destabilized. And I’m afraid they won’t want to leave when the war is over.” That concern actually made a lot of sense to me.

About gun control, he said: “Yes, citizens are allowed to have guns here, but we don’t have mass shootings, or too many gun-related suicides.” He did recall one incident in a movie theater. Someone was irritated by his neighbor’s noisy popcorn chewing. He shot him. Dainis’s concern, though, is that people who own guns don’t know how to use them.” (FYI, Americans own more than one gun per capita, and growing; in Latvia, it’s one gun for every 10 people and shrinking.)

Dainis is a brave angel. He told me he attends online workshops like this whenever he can: in India, Italy, the US. He worries about Putin’s expansionist intentions and is grateful that his country is protected by NATO membership, but has legitimate concerns about the future.

My epiphany? I could hear his doubts about unrestricted immigration with an open mind. I could understand his frustration with ignorant gun owners. I might have strong opinions about those issues here in the US, but I was clueless about Latvia. Our talk reminded me to listen with greater care to Americans whose opinions differ from mine. I might learn something. At the very least, our relationship will be strengthened - and isn't that what baptism is really all about? Being in close and loving relationship with God and one another? Isn't that why Jesus was born, baptized, and turned again and again to God, why he died, and lives in us today? It's all about relationships. It's about clearing landmines of prejudice so we can all live together as one human family without fear. Knowing we are baptized, that God makes us right, we don't have to try so hard to prove others are wrong.



I know you are all brave angels here, courageous enough to connect with those who disagree with you, honest enough to try to understand the issues that divide us, faithful enough to want to clear the landmines that keep us apart. I invite you to consider your own baptism and ponder what it means. Can it be a bridge that connects us? Ponder your own epiphanies, your own “aha” moments. As you wonder, pray with me a prayer I pray often, written by Thomas Merton:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following Your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please You does in fact please You. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that, if I do this, You will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust You always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for You are ever with me, and You will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.

Image credits

Baptism of Jesus, Liz Valente, 2021. From **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN.

Jesus on Twitter, Recycled Paper Greetings

Red/Blue fists, BraverAngels.org

All Latvian images from Unsplash:

Latvian flag, Kaspars Upmansin

Freedom Monument, Priyank P.

Riga Bridge, Vidar Nordli Mathisen

All others from the internet

Prayers

God, you are so patient with us. Sometimes it seems we are determined to set up barriers between ourselves and others, while your coming to us reminds us again to take them down.

Sometimes, too, we forget that walls are necessary for protection, that safe places like the Women's Shelter need to exist when life in a person's own home becomes too dangerous to sustain. We forget that neighbors sometimes threaten and invade neighbors, and kill indiscriminately. We thank you for followers like Martin Luther King, Jr., who kept trying to help us see a bigger picture, for justice that included some and excluded others. Help us listen to our braver angels, and strive for peace in our homes, our communities, our nation, and our world. Help us follow Jesus' example of reaching out in love.

Open our hearts to one another, to act in ways that protect others, whether from diseases like covid, or domestic violence, or the devastation of climate change. We pray for your children in Ukraine, in Latvia, in Alabama and Georgia, in California, in all the sorrowing places on earth. We pray for those among us who are grieving, those who are struggling with pain, illness, despair, fear.

Help us to do the impossible and pray even for our enemies. May we never let hate rule us, even as we wait and work for your will to prevail on earth. Remember us in your love and teach us to pray, Our Father and Mother in heaven....

Bonus poem:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time*

T. S. Eliot, from "Little Gidding," *The Four Quartets*