



Welcome!

First Congregational Church
of Webster Groves
United Church of Christ

Seek Christ in each. Serve God in all.

January 10, 2021

BAPTISM OF JESUS



*We respond to God's call by welcoming everyone
regardless of ability, age, ethnicity, race, gender identity,
sexual orientation or socio-economic background.*

*To proclaim in word and deed the love of Christ, we affirm that
all may share in the full life, ministry, fellowship, responsibilities
and blessing of our congregation.*

*No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey,
you are welcome here.*

Order of Worship

PRELUDE

WELCOME

Jane Porchey

TOLLING THE BELL AND LIGHTING THE CANDLES

CALL TO WORSHIP (Responsive – Leader; People)

from Psalm 29

Ascribe to Yahweh, O heavenly beings.

Ascribe to Yahweh, glory and strength.

Ascribe to Yahweh, the glory of God's name.

Worship Yahweh in holy splendor.

Yahweh's voice is over the waters; the God of glory thunders.

Yahweh, over mighty waters!

Yahweh's voice is powerful.

Yahweh's voice is full of majesty.

Yahweh's voice breaks the cedars, breaks the cedars of Lebanon, making Lebanon skip like a calf and Sirion like a young wild ox.

Yahweh's voice flashes forth flames of fire.

Yahweh's voice causes the oaks to whirl and strips the forest bare.

And in God's temple all say, "GLORY!"

Yahweh's voice sits enthroned over the flood.

Our God is enthroned forever.

May Yahweh give strength to us!

May Yahweh bless us with peace!

RAISING THE COVENANT (Unison)

Covenant of 1977

**We who are called of God into this Christian community covenant together:
to seek to know the will of God, to experience the joy and struggle of
discipleship, to proclaim in word and deed the love of Christ, and to work for
peace and justice among all people. We trust God's promise of grace and
forgiveness and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our trials and rejoicing.**

HYMN

Crashing Waters at Creation

Sylvia G. Dunstan

Crashing waters at creation
ordered by the Spirit's breath,
First to witness day's beginning
from the brightness of night's death.

Cleansing water once at Jordan
closed around the One foretold,
Opened to reveal the glory
ever new and ever old.

Living water, never-ending,
quench the thirst and flood the soul.

Wellspring, Source of life eternal,
drench our dryness, make us whole.

PRAYER OF APPROACH (Unison)

Merrimon Boyd, *Student Pastor*

O Holy Spirit, giver of light and life, breath of God, we know that we are often more inclined to live in the shadows and to focus on death. Forgive us, we pray, and help us forgive ourselves. Bring us out from our morbidness; show us again the brilliance of the life you give. Grant to us thoughts higher than our own thoughts, prayers better than our own prayers, and powers stronger than our own powers. For we long to know the ways of love and goodness and to live in ways that reflect the image of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

NOT FOR CHILDREN ONLY

Rev. David Denoon, *Pastor*

THE WORD SHARED

Merrimon Boyd

From the Hebrew Scriptures

Genesis 1:1-5

New Revised Standard Version, ad.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, and the earth was formless and void and darkness covered the face of the deep, a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

From the Gospels

Mark 1:4-11

NRSV

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.

Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

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

Response.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the people.

Thanks be to God.

ANTHEM

What Ruler Wades Through Murky Streams

Thomas Troeger

What ruler wades through murky streams
and bows beneath the wave,
Ignoring how the world esteems
the powerful and brave?

Refrain.

Water, River, Spirit, Grace,
sweep over me, sweep over me!
Recarve the depths your fingers traced
in sculpting me.

Christ gleams with water brown with clay
from land the prophets trod.
Above while heaven's clouds give way
descends the dove of God. *Refrain.*

Come, bow beneath the flowing wave.
Christ stands here at your side
and raises you as from the grave
God raised the crucified. *Refrain.*

MESSAGE OF THE DAY

"Wild Water"

Rev. Denoon

It's been difficult to compose this week's message.

I'd started out the year, thinking that this would begin with a meditation on baptism and then move into a discussion that would include the voice of God, so vividly presented in our readings today – at the beginning of Creation, during a thunderstorm, and following Jesus' immersion in the Jordan River by John.

So, I guess I'll still do that, briefer than I'd intended. And then I have to go somewhere else with it, where I hadn't expected to go... indicating perhaps the truth of my title, "Wild Water."

That makes me think. I need to go somewhere else with this.

[The Pastor exits the pulpit and the sanctuary, then the building, gets in his car, and drives to Castlewood State Park, where he preaches the remainder of the message from a path along the Meramec River.]

The pervasiveness and power of water and wind make them apt metaphors for Spirit, the Holy Spirit. Indeed, as any victim of flood or storm will tell you, if the wildness of water doesn't put you on your knees in taking it seriously, then you're a fool or you're not paying attention. And Jesus' reference to himself as "living water" in the gospel according to John I have no doubt was put there, to indicate to anyone trying to be faithful just how difficult a time they are going to have. You're not going to be able to control holiness and its effects; you are definitely not going to be able to predict it or where it will take you; and you are most assuredly going to be wrecked by it more than once in your lifetime.

That knowledge may have been what motivated Jesus to choose baptism as the occasion to begin his ministry. His decision to do so would change the meaning and purpose of baptism for people who believe as he did in Who God Is.

The ritual that John was practicing at the Jordan was a, perhaps ironic, spiritual cleansing practice. People came to him confessing their sins, and he would give them something of a bath. The rolling waters of the river symbolized for the person who was dropped into them the quality of not only bathing but whatever was clinging to the person rolling with the waters right downstream. It was different from a mikvah bath, that ritual cleansing at the end of a woman's menses or upon the reception of a man into the Jewish faith, which would take place at the Temple or, nowadays, at an Orthodox synagogue. Mikvah water only receives the individual,

passing them from one side of the pool to the other with a momentary submergence. The person is doing all the work; the water for all intents and purposes is passive.

Now I don't want to give you the impression that John's baptism was superior to the mikvah. That is not what I'm saying here. I am saying that John's baptism was genuinely different in intent and meaning than the mikvah. It is qualitatively different to step into moving water than into a pool: the water in this case is active, flowing. It is notable that the word in Hebrew (and in Greek) for "flowing" means the same as "living." So, when Jesus, speaking to the woman at the well in John chapter 4, refers to the Holy Spirit as "living water," it is no accident if our imaginations should picture Jesus again at the Jordan being lowered into those streams. Nor that we, when thinking of our own baptisms, should find ourselves with Jesus there.

Baptism for Christians morphs John's cleansing ritual into a metaphor for life itself, in all its wildness. Holy is that water like an expectant mother's water breaking. Holy is the lack of control we experience in life flowing forward. Holy is its unpredictability or its destination. And most assuredly holy is the utter leveling of life upon encountering the Spirit's power. Baptism with Jesus was nothing that John had ever participated in, before Jesus.

That all of our scriptures this morning present the voice of God speaking – before a moment takes shape (as we read in Genesis 1), in the midst of storm and peace (as in Psalm 29), and after the completion of an unexpected outcome (as in Mark 1) – should come as no surprise. God is at, with, and beyond us, always. With this in mind, we realize that as did Paul in his letter to the Roman church, more than cleansing or mere restoration, baptism means upheaval and its outcome is rebirth.

However.

Lest you imagine that this rebirth sets you off on a path wholly unlike the life you were living before, keep your spiritual imaginations centered upon the metaphors we've been using today – creation, storm, and flowing stream, and each of them accompanied by the voice of God. As I told the children, a little while ago, although we may find ourselves reassured and calmed by the abiding presence of God (and you know how wondrous the effect of a visit in nature can be to a troubled human heart), there is still an awesomeness to each which evokes in us a certain underlying fear.

Two summers ago, I read Elaine Pagels' *Why Religion? A Personal Story*. Actually, it's a number of stories. The ones that stick with me are the tragedies: the death of her biological son at an early age due to a birth defect, the death of her husband. Her husband Heinz, a brilliant physicist, died suddenly, shortly after they adopted their third child, when a mountain path he was ascending gave way and he plummeted into a rocky precipice. His body was not so much retrieved as collected. One cannot help but reflect on the majesty and horror of what is for Elaine a truly sacred place. Nature is awesome and fearsome when we perceive it as it is. Furthermore, life is just as awesome and fearsome. Elaine reflects in her memoir how utterly intimidated she was then at the prospect of rearing two children still in diapers without her spouse. So much, at least for a long while, for pursuing very deeply her academic interests in the Gnostic Gospels and other Christian history. She would just need to apply her shoulder to her load-bearing life and find a way forward in love.

Such is nature. Such is life. And baptism, for all its spiritual benefits, will protect us from neither. Indeed, it emphasizes the very awesomeness and fearsomeness we both love and dread.

I believe that the turning of this new year and the events of this past week make this religious information ring true. A president who has proved himself a rogue, possibly a traitor, but genuinely unworthy of the reins of leadership. People so accustomed to their privilege that

they fancied themselves righteous rebels when all they were insurrectionist boobs. A police force so apt to believe that white people might somehow by nature be safe and orderly that they even forgot to arrest very many of them. And a senator so in love with his own principles that he cast judgment upon the lawmakers, judicial officials, and even citizens of another state. It's embarrassing.

Meanwhile, just ahead of all that, I myself was so out of love with the year just past that I put a message in our signboards, "Aren't all of us now glad to have 2020 hindsight! God bless 2021!" I was premature, to say the least. I cannot be sure that I will love 2021. Even with vaccines available now, I cannot be sure.

Wild water.

Wild water.

But there's a way through. Truly there is.

Always we hear the voice of God, pronouncing every new day into being, grumbling and shouting through the storms, blessing us into the unpredictability of our lives – creating, sustaining, transforming. Can we abide this? I mean, some days I wonder just how many more historic events I can take, especially the embarrassing ones! Maybe you do too.

Yes, I am sure we can. We have the Power and Source of the universe here with us, attending us, encouraging us.

In Christ's name.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

We Lift Our Joys and Concerns

- Our residents in assisted living and skilled care
- People we love who are living with cancer
- All those the world regards as disabled
- People with mental illness, as well as their family, friends, caregivers, and roommates
- People living with dementia, and their caregivers
- People who are lonely or alone
- Those whose employment and businesses are at risk
- COVID-19 patients
- Front line workers and their loved ones; with a special prayer for medical personnel who are working with COVID patients
- Thanksgiving for our incoming Pastoral Assistant (who will be introduced to the Congregation in a few weeks)
- Healing for our country and all its people
- Peace with justice

Prayer of the Day

Prayer of Our Savior (Unison)

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil; for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

WE SHARE OUR GIFTS WITH OTHERS

Jane Porchey

Invitation

Prayer of Dedication (Unison)

All good gifts around us come from you, O God. You have given us life and new life in Christ through your Spirit. As you have given us these gifts, so we offer our own gifts and pledge that we will be gifts to one another and to the world. This is the Way that Jesus taught and lived. Amen.

BENEDICTION (Pastor; **People**; *Student Pastor*)

Renew in us, O God, all the gifts of baptism —

Strength for life's journey, courage in time of suffering, the joy of faith, the freedom of love, and the hope of new life;

Through Jesus Christ who makes us one.

ALL: SEND US IN YOUR NAME, HOLY ONE. AMEN.

POSTLUDE

DISMISSAL



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