Immersed and Discontented

A Meditation on Mark 1: 4 – 11 and Acts 19: 1 – 7

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church January 10, 2021

*Lord, when You came to Jordan and asked to be baptized,*

*what was Your vow and vision of love and sacrifice?’*

*Was there a sudden splendor of prophets, priests, and kings,*

*a wind that stirred the waters, a blur of mighty wings?*

*Faith rests content with questions of when and why and how,*

*but craves the gift of seeing, “What God is doing now.”*

*Christ, bring us to our Jordan of newly opened eyes,*

*through love, immersed in living, as you were once baptized.*

These are the words of the closing hymn we will sing today, but I wanted you to hear them now, to have time to live with them *now*, before the million other things you have to do today begin to crowd into your experience of worship. Brian Wrenn is the poet who penned these lines. Listen again to the closing stanza:

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*but craves the gift of seeing, “What God is doing now.”*

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*through love, immersed in living, as you were once baptized.*

Epiphany, as I mentioned last Sunday, is more than one feast day on the church’s calendar. We celebrate the arrival of the magi, travelers in search of a mystery. We also celebrate Jesus’ baptism at the Jordan, and the revelation of Jesus’ identity before the community as another critical experience of Epiphnay. We celebrate Jesus, “God with us,” who is “love, immersed in living” on this earth.

I am in deep need of a reminder of “love, immersed in living” this week, traumatized by the events that unfolded at our nation’s Capital on the Feast of Epiphany. Instead of a feasting day, it was a day of tragedy. It truly was a day of revelation, as we came face to face with the full blown depths of hatred, racism and bigotry. The waters of this epiphany are the tears of siblings, the tears of our communities, weeping over how lost we have become. If *we* - Grace – and friends with shared theologies - had been present, if *we* had been in D.C., attempting to offer a peaceful alternative to the violence, would we have been able to find a face we recognize in the angry mob? Not as in someone we know personally, although that could have been the case, but as in a fellow follower of Jesus?

Were there any rioters on Wednesday who do not claim to love and serve God and call themselves Christian? They seemed to dominate the crowd, waving signs proclaiming “Jesus saves” and “God, guns & guts made America, let’s keep all three.” ([The Jericho March, Christianity, and the Capitol Siege - The Atlantic](https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/01/evangelicals-catholics-jericho-march-capitol/617591/)) Some of the rioters are members of the Oath Keepers; read about them on the Southern Poverty Law Center’s website. Have no doubt: they are a hate group, pledging violence against our President elect and Vice-President elect, while many also proclaim to be Christian. ([Hatewatch | Southern Poverty Law Center (splcenter.org)](https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch) Some of the rioters were members of Jericho March, an evangelical organization committed to ensure that “the walls of corruption crumble.” And they get to define what constitutes as corruption.

I spoke with Grace friend, Britton Williams on Thursday. Britton, a Dallas resident, is employed by a Jewish non-profit which provides a wealth of services to the community, including significant no-interest loans. Britton shared that tears stung his eyes during staff meeting. There they spoke of the image of a man wearing a shirt with the logo 6MWE. I had to admit I didn’t know what this was. 6MWE stands for “six million weren’t enough.” As in six million massacred Jews were not enough.

And I ask: how is it possible that you and I were baptized in the same waters as those who arm themselves with semi-automatic weapons and pledge themselves to violence? But that question pales in comparison to this one: How is it possible that *Jesus* was baptized in the same waters as those who arm themselves with semi-automatic weapons and pledge themselves to violence in his name? What do we do with this knowledge? Would they be saying the same thing of us, “how could we share the same water?” And I wonder, if they heard the words of this hymn, would they hear something different in these words:

*Lord, when You came to Jordan and asked to be baptized,*

*what was Your vow and vision of love and sacrifice?’*

Would those words be their call to arms? Which also strikes me as a tragic turn of phrase: call to arms as a call to pick up our weapons, rather than to reach out with the arms of compassion and care and aide. When we imagine Jesus’ arms, we imagine them lifting a child from her sick bed, helping Zacchaeus down from the tree, extending them to offer bread to hungry crowds, protecting a soldier who has come to arrest him from the strength of Peter’s sword, draping a towel over them as he kneels to wash feet, stretching them out across the beams of a cross, a victim of a state sanctioned execution.

How have we emerged from the same waters, strangers to one another?

Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River is a mystery to us. A baptism of repentance for a man who was sinless? The early church struggled with this story, not wanting to embrace it for fear that it undermined Jesus’ essence as Immanuel. What if we imagine, as Jesus stands in those waters, that he carries our repentance upon his shoulders. What if we imagine that there, in those waters, is where our redemption takes place? Our salvation. I struggle with Jesus’ execution as the symbol of our redeeming. I know that a broken world killed him, that our brokenness destroyed him, but I cannot believe that was God’s primary method of our salvation.

I hope that doesn’t sound as heresy, but I do not believe in a God who is so small that that God requires death to give us life. I believe our salvation begins with creation, and carries through from Jesus’ birth to his sacrificial living and on to resurrection. Yes, Jesus triumphed over death. We see that promise symbolized at the beginning of his ministry, when Jesus stepped into the baptismal waters and emerged reborn, integrated into our lives. All of our repentant or unrepentant lives. Jesus stood in the murkily holy waters of the Jordan as so many had stood before him.

The Jordan is a symbol of freedom from enslavement, freedom from suffering, freedom from fear. Remember how the Hebrew people wandered for forty years, before crossing the Jordan river into the Promised Land? Remember the prophet Elisha, and his instruction (through a servant girl) to Naaman to wash seven times in the Jordan so that he could be cleansed of leprosy? Remember how, at the Jordan, Elijah struck the river with his mantle so that he and Elisha could cross over? From there Elijah blessed Elisha to carry on his prophetic ministry. We cannot deny that the Jordan also witnessed many battle marches, many war deaths. These waters have known the power of God as well as the violence of humanity. Into these conflicted waters Jesus is baptized. Into our conflicted lives, Jesus is baptized.

We do not have stories of Jesus baptizing others with water, as John said, Jesus brought a distinct baptism, a baptism of the Holy Spirit. In our story from the book of Acts, we encounter a cluster of disciples who are unfamiliar with the Holy Spirit. They have been baptized with water (possibly as followers of John, possibly as followers of Jesus) but now they learn there is another baptism. Hand in hand with the baptism of repentance is the baptism of God’s spirit. Both are baptisms of renewal, both are baptisms of inclusion and welcome. With the first, we recognize God’s claim on our lives, God’s love for us, with the second, we are empowered to be God’s people. God’s peacemaking, love sowing people. Both baptisms are gifts of God, for all God’s people.

Jesus chose baptism. Jesus could have chosen anointing instead. He could have received anointing with oil as those in authority were anointed: prophets, priests and kings. He chose instead to join us in the waters of repentance and then pour God’s Spirit out upon us, breathe God’s Spirit into us.

I can’t claim to begin to understand the mysteries of God. I don’t understand a baptism that unites me with people who choose hate and violence. Wren writes, “Faith rests content with questions of when and why and how.” I will pray for that kind of faith, because today my faith leaves me discontented. The questions of how Christianity could be warped into something that Jesus wouldn’t recognize, that Jesus would disavow, leave me weak. I know many of you feel the same way – perplexed, discouraged, frightened. But though we may be discontented in our faith, let us ever remember that we are immersed in love. Bathed in love. May that define us in the face of hatred, for that is something Jesus will recognize.

May God have mercy on us all, renewing us through repentance and the Spirit. And may we look to Jesus who is “love immersed in living,” the author and perfector of our faith. Thanks be to God. Amen.