

January 10, 2021 (Focus: Mark 1: 4-11; Baptism of Christ)

Like many if not all of my colleagues, I struggled with what to preach today. All across social media, I saw many of them mention the common phenomenon of the sermon outlined on Tuesday torn up by late Tuesday night, then the rewrite torn up Wednesday afternoon, then draft after draft abandoned as emotions waxed and waned. There were highs to celebrate, in the first black person elected to the Senate in a state that historically has one of the highest percentage of people of color in our country, and with us nearing ever so slowly it seemed to a new administration with the promise of more just policies as we saw cabinet appointments looking more representative of us all than we have had in recent years.

There were also great lows to lament and process this week, as we saw fear and violence stoked to a consequence we never imagined could be possible, with a very seat of our democracy overrun by terrorists causing destruction and mayhem, threatening the lives of our leaders, and causing death. How do we respond, as people who pray “as we forgive those who trespass against us” yet in our hearts know that accountability and punishment are needed? And then this week there were days upon days of new records set of the number sick and dead from this pandemic, while we waited for the full effect of people recklessly gathered and traveling for holidays to manifest itself, and while we tried to process promises of quick vaccinations get stalled in too little planning and too little leadership by those whom we should hold responsible.

Yes all this and more to process, and yes, if our faith is a living faith, a faith to be lived out in the world and not just for one hour every week, then we are indeed processing all of these happenings in our public life in light of our faith. So of the many many directions our reflections could take this morning, where do I want to go?

In the end I could do only one thing, and turn to our gospel reading for today from Mark’s gospel, and in doing so I remembered that Mark’s gospel begins with the verse: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” This is what Mark wanted people to know about the stories he was about to share, that it was indeed good news of Jesus Christ. Thinking about that verse, it reminded me of another gospel passage, from the fourth chapter of Luke. At the very beginning of his ministry, Luke tells us that:

⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, ¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

The Lord “has anointed me to bring good news to the poor”, Jesus said, here again a reminder to bring good news. Jesus said to follow him, so here I am, following him, offering good news this morning.

Where was the good news this week? Well, as it turned out, it was all around us; I didn’t need to look far to find good news. For in this past week, our confirmation class met to begin its work of exploring further what it means to be on a journey of faith; young folks seeking to know God better – that is indeed good news. And this week, adults also met in their own “confirmation class,” to renew their own faith journey; people seeking to know God better, again good news. This week, some folks gathered for our midweek chat and offered friendly faces and encouraging conversation, a way to give and receive care. People being good news for one another. This week, we continued to support the work of the Personal Essentials Pantry operating out of our building, serving many families in need this week and even helping some to have much needed warmth through the mittens Donna Salzwadel had out in our narthex. Our congregation being good news.

This week there were many many things done that would constitute good news among us, including many acts of kindness offered by folks in our congregation and in our community; surely each of us witnessed or heard of at least one, right? There were cards or emails sent, phone calls made “just to check up” on someone but there is of course no mere “just” about such a simple yet valuable gesture.

There are people in housing or being fed because of our mission giving. We are working toward helping young people in our community through a new partnership with the Goodman Center, good news for our community. And we are working to help protect creation with new solar panels, if approved by the congregation at the Annual Meeting, good news for all creation.

This week you cared for children and parents and friends and neighbors. This week you held people in prayer. This week you loved others through truth spoken to power and with anger at wrongs perpetrated. This week you loved others through smiles and tears and laughter and kind words and attentive listening.

In Mark's gospel we encounter Jesus being baptized and then hear God's Spirit proclaim, "you are my beloved, with you I am well pleased." God is likely not pleased with humanity all the time, not as so many are sick and dying while others party and won't do the minimum of loving neighbor by wearing a facemask and not gathering, choosing liberty over love of neighbor. God is not well pleased with those who committed violence in our nation's Capitol, and God is not well pleased with those who incited such violence or who foment division in our communities. God is not well pleased with those who do not mourn the loss of life of those who seek to bring order, nor is God well pleased with those who would sweep under the rug crimes in the false and expedient name of "unity" while continuing to foment division and stoke violence. God is not well pleased with those who abet those who seek to divide, and God is not well pleased with those who are complicit in their silence and appeasement.

God is not well pleased with those who ignore the economic toll of this pandemic on their neighbors and have no trouble watching millions gather in line for food handouts and face evictions while comfortable themselves and even making wealth off of the pandemic. God is not well pleased with those who offer justice to some but not others, based on the color of one's skin or where they are from or whom they love.

No, there are times when God is not well pleased with humanity, but God loves humanity. Imperfect as we are, broken as we are, selfish as we are, self-serving as we are, self-pitying as we are, fearful as we are, scared and frightened and struggling to offer the love we are given to others as we are, we are beloved. It is inexplicable, it is mysterious, it is wondrous: we are beloved.

There is good news to share, and the Good news is even though God is not well pleased with humanity at times, God loves humanity, and sometimes, just sometimes, we do too.

Let us pray. O God who is love, who calls us beloved, help us to love in word and deed.

Children's Message: conversation with "shepherd" (like Lillian Daniel's video) –

(too shy to talk in front of people, used to just talking to sheep, so wrote it down)

I wanted to tell you about something I saw recently. My dad and I took our sheep down to the River Jordan to get a drink of water, and I saw that guy who is called John the Baptist; dresses funny and seems a bit wild when he's yelling about repentance, but today he was just blessing people and dunking them into the river. But then there was this one guy, he seemed kinda different, I can't quite explain it, and at first John hesitated about baptizing him, but eventually he did it. And afterward all of a sudden the clouds seem to part to make way for the sun to shine down, and a ray of light hit exactly on the man who was just baptized, as if to say God was blessing him specially, and then a dove was flying around, a good omen.

I asked my dad what he thought of it, and he said it reminded him of another time, when he was out at night tending the herd, and saw a light shine in the sky seemingly right above a certain manger, and when they all went to investigate, there was a baby, a baby who seemed quite special, and the whole place seemed to be full of God and love. That was a special day, and this day too.

You just never know where and when you might feel God especially close, and what stories you might have to tell.

Creator God, we seek your holy presence in this moment, we desperately need your holy presence in this moment. We continue to face great difficulties, and can't believe some of the images in the news just this week. We can't believe the fears stoked and the violence perpetrated, or maybe it is that they have become more commonplace than we ever imagined they could be. We are edge, as instability seems to have become the norm in areas of our public and private lives where we have come to expect stability. We are becoming numb to the shocking numbers sick and dead in this pandemic. There are way too many hungry and homeless, unemployed or underemployed, too many missing vital connections. We are tired, we are angry, we are worried, we are weary, we are wondering when relief will come.

Something on our hearts today is forgiveness. We hear Jesus' call, through the prayer he gave us, to receive forgiveness as well as to forgive. But we struggle with offering forgiveness if there is not also responsibility admitted and accountability worked through. Help us to remember that forgiveness heals our hearts and helps to heal relationships, but responsibility and accountability are also measures needed for healing and righting wrongs. Help us to forgive, and help us to work toward righting the wrong, mending the broken, and ensuring that oppression, violence, discrimination, and prejudice are not learned or taught or stoked anymore.

But in Christ, we have been given a new Light, kindling unconditional love for us, and showing us a well-lit path to healing and wholeness and forgiveness, to courage and clarity and action, to words and deeds that uplift and inspire. Ever Gracious God, pour out your love and your healing powers upon our world in need. Pour out your love and your healing powers upon us, and upon all those in need of healing in body, mind, and spirit. Grant all in need an experience of your renewing compassion and care, especially...

Moment of silent meditation...

Gracious God, grant us peace in our minds and in our hearts, as we struggle with being citizens of the world and as we seek to be accountable to each other and all creation. We know you intend peace for us, for we have heard it in the words of our teacher and spiritual guide and savior, the one we call the Prince of Peace, who taught us to pray to you, saying, Our Father...