

Worship Service – January 10, 2021 (Baptism of Christ)
Texts: Matthew 3:1-17
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Gospel Reading: Matthew 3:1-17

(Ursula Charaf)

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight.’”

Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

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.”*

Sermon

- I. Every week I drive north from Oconto Falls to Eagle River, passing through a series of towns:
 - a. I’ve noticed almost every town has a laundromat;
 - b. Suring, Mountain, Lakewood, Wabeno, Laona, Crandon, Three Lakes...
 - c. Do you ever go to a laundromat? Or remember a time when you did?
 - d. We’ve all needed to go to a laundromat at some time;
 - e. Every community needs a laundromat!
 - i. People need to have ways to get clean; it’s a matter of human dignity;

- ii. Not just our clothes, but our bodies, too: that feeling of a fresh towel and clean sheets to crawl into; freshly washed hair;
 - iii. If you've ever been sick for a few days, then felt good enough to get up and take a shower, wash your hair, brush your teeth...how good it feels to be clean and human again!
 - iv. Or if you're like my husband and work outside and get dirty and cold, coming in at the end of the day to wash off the outside world and smell good again is really important!
 - v. I heard about a church that installed a washer and dryer in their building for their community that didn't have a laundromat.

- II. Because being clean is so fundamental to daily life, cleansing rituals are common in different traditions, including for Christians in baptism.
 - a. We need cleansing rituals because we get dirty, outside and inside!
 - b. We've done things and been places that stain us,
 - c. We see things that disgust us in the news, or in the community, the way people treat each other or the harm we're doing to our environment;
 - d. We endure losses that break our hearts
 - e. We are emotionally stained by people's cruelty
 - f. Or sometimes it's the opposite: maybe you're the one whose soiled everything around you
 - g. You've snapped at people you love; or become too controlling; or overlooked what someone else needed; been selfish
 - h. maybe it's you who made a mess of things and needs to clean that mess up with apology or changed behavior.
 - i. We are human; we hurt people and they hurt us; we stain the world.
 - j. Sometimes we just need to just wash it all off, clear our heads and start over fresh

- III. On the First Sunday after Epiphany, we remember the Baptism of Christ
 - a. John the Baptist offered baptism as spiritual cleansing to people who had been hurt and left out of their own sanctuaries of healing;
 - b. And he had harsh words for the religious leaders who did some of the hurting, calling them a "brood of vipers"!
 - c. John was preparing people for the coming of a Messiah who would offer a different kind of cleansing and a new start--not just to the "deserving" ones, but to anyone who believed God could love and accept them.
 - d. You didn't have to jump through ritual hoops to be cleansed and welcomed by God; you didn't have to make expensive sacrifices. You just had to confess your sin, believe that you were loved and forgiven by God, and accept the free gift of grace. No soap or quarters required.

- IV. So, one day as John is offering baptisms to all these people in the wilderness, here comes Jesus, asking to be baptized;
 - a. John understands Jesus is his moral superior, so it doesn't feel right at first for him to baptize Jesus.

- b. But Jesus insists, and in the baptismal event, the Holy Spirit descends like a dove and a voice from heaven affirms Jesus as God’s “beloved son”, with whom God is “well pleased”.
 - c. Maybe Jesus needed to be baptized not because he needed cleansing so much, but because he needed to wash off the world and receive that affirmation we all need:
 - i. That he truly belonged to God,
 - ii. That the Holy Spirit would help him,
 - iii. and that God would never let go of him on the hard road he would travel in his ministry.
 - d. It’s the same for us. When we get baptized, cleansing is a part of it;
 - i. but we also receive that affirmation that we are marked as God’s beloved children.
 - ii. And this sense of spiritual power God promises us, if we listen and follow Christ’s leading.
- V. So, on this day in the Church year, we affirm or re-affirm our baptisms.
- a. Even if there are no baptisms celebrated today, it’s a day to remember **your** baptism;
 - i. it’s early in the year and we’re trying to let go of some bad stuff we want to wash off from the past year 2020
 - ii. Maybe you’re cleaning house, cleaning out the fridge; starting a new exercise program or eating healthier;
 - iii. This is a day to ritually cleanse your heart and soul
- VI. If we were together in the sanctuary today, I might have you come to this font. I love your church’s beautiful font, and I noticed when I first came here that it is set close to the entrance of the church, rather than being up front by the chancel like in some churches. Do you know why?
- a. It’s because Christians are said to “*pass through the waters of baptism*” on our faith journeys, just like Jesus did; so every time you come here, you remember that you passed through the baptismal waters and were cleansed and welcomed into Christ’s family.
- VII. Since we can’t come to your church’s font today, I’d like to invite you to engage with some water at home instead.
- a. If you have another person worshipping with you (your spouse, your roommate, your child or parent), go together to the kitchen or bathroom sink, find a towel and run some warm water and soap.
 - b. Then, wash each other’s hands. One just offers their hands, the other does the washing. Gently wash your partners hands, and then dry them with the towel.
 - c. If you’re worshipping alone, you might fill the sink with some warm water, and just soak your hands for a few minutes in the water, maybe with some nice smelling soap.
 - d. Either way, as you enjoy the warm water, try letting go of any thought, actions, worries, mistakes, regrets that have hindered you in the recent past.
 - i. Maybe some anxiety you can’t let go of

- ii. Or a disagreement with someone that has left you agitated
 - iii. Or a mistake, or grief, or a fault you wish you could change
- e. Let yourself be spiritually cleansed and remind yourself: this is what your baptism, your belonging in Christ, is for: so that God can claim you as God's beloved child, forever! And so you can start again, refreshed, on your faith journey.

- VIII. Going through the waters of baptism means we admit that we're not as clean as we pretend to be; we all need this cleansing water;
- a. But every day, you can choose to put aside whatever went wrong yesterday or last year
 - b. Whatever grief or hurt you're ready to let go of and move on.
 - c. Whatever sin or bad habit you want to change in yourself
 - d. You can pick up new spiritual gifts to carry forward: forgiveness and grace, generosity, expressions of compassion and love...
 - e. You can go back any time to that spiritual laundromat where God gives you a chance to be renewed for a fresh start.

Amen.