

**Remember Your Baptism**  
**A Sermon on Mark 1:4-11**  
**Rev. Anita Peebles**  
**January 10, 2021**



This past Wednesday, January 6, was the holy day of Epiphany, the day we remember how the magi followed an auspicious astrological sign to meet the baby Jesus, the Christ child, the special one sent from God. Part of the story is the homage and gift-giving part, where the wise ones bend their knees in front of a toddler and his teenage mother. But the other part of the story is about a tyrant, fearing the loss of his power so much that he incites violence, even going so far as to send his military to target baby boys under the age of 2, just in case they could be the one for whom the magi searched. And of course, we also remember that the magi chose to go home by another way, instead of reporting the location of the Christ child to the murderous king.

Rev. Alyssa Adalpe, a pastor in the Alliance of Baptists, wrote this as the intro to her important article published on Thursday: “I imagine there were some in the region who could not believe that Herod, a tyrant who was known for being paranoid and violent, would do such a thing. “This isn’t who we are!” “How could he?””<sup>1</sup>

And I wonder, perhaps there were those who had wondered how much damage Herod could really do, seeing as he was only a puppet governor controlled by the Empire. He’s jealous and selfish and paranoid...the officials around him will keep him in check...right?...right?

So what, then, do we do, when we are faced with modern-day Herod, obsessed with winning, intoxicated with power, living in an echo chamber of lies and hearing only the fawning of people who deify him? What do we do when innocents are being cut down and the head of government makes no move to stop the violence?

My prayer is that we, like the magi, will choose another path.

We celebrated Epiphany last Sunday a bit, and I start this sermon on Epiphany today because Epiphany was on a Wednesday, in the middle of the week, in a liminal space between Sundays when we gather together for worship. And the events in this nation’s capitol on Wednesday the 6th also led us into a liminal time. Boundaries were crossed, walls were breached--literally--as white supremacist terrorists sought to claim the center of our country’s government. The foundational work of this democracy was disrupted, throwing into question how and when Congress would return to the work of certifying the election. There was a period of hours where we wondered when law enforcement would step in, when the national guard would be called, even as people Tweeted that they got all the way to lawmaker’s offices and we saw a self-styled QAnon Shaman in the seat of the Speaker of the House.

This insurrection was shocking and horrifying to watch, but we should not be surprised.

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[https://baptistnews.com/article/remember-that-epiphany-ends-with-herods-terror/?fbclid=IwAR2nDMBjagdBRGGx0yFp-j4sU6dy0YuLHb\\_hdpCDvHSBuWcXVKd8YLtqVxo#.X\\_dtuWRKhap](https://baptistnews.com/article/remember-that-epiphany-ends-with-herods-terror/?fbclid=IwAR2nDMBjagdBRGGx0yFp-j4sU6dy0YuLHb_hdpCDvHSBuWcXVKd8YLtqVxo#.X_dtuWRKhap)

Not surprised because, as Rev. Adalpe reminded us in that article, this country was founded by people who saw other humans as property, as dispensable, as heathen, as “other,” despite the fact that they were the newcomers to the continent. We should not be surprised because political leaders in the USA for the last two hundred and fifty years have been telling us who they are and what they stand for and getting elected even, and sometimes especially, when their bigotry is on full display. Friends, I respectfully ask that if you have been paying attention at all to USAmerican politics, feel free to be shocked by the events of this past week, but please check yourself if you feel surprised.

Y’all, I know this is not a sermon about “unity” and “reconciliation” as many people around the country are preaching and receiving today. But I do not believe God is calling us to unity and reconciliation at this time...at least, not the kind of unity that looks like polite smiles and photo ops and disingenuous press conferences and that sounds like calls to forgive when the damage that has been done has not even been acknowledged. And not the kind of reconciliation that speaks platitudes about well-meaning citizens being brainwashed and that retires from cabinet offices at the opportune moment and that says “colorblindness” is the goal and that is devoid of any deep, self-reflective work on the part of white USAmerican citizens to tear out white supremacy from the roots of our society.

There have been so many thoughts swirling in my mind and in my heart, and I know from those of you I’ve spoken with that your thoughts and emotions have been swirling as well. We have gone through collective trauma this week, as we watched the news unfold on Wednesday and have been afraid of what comes next. This waiting space is not quite like the waiting space of advent, when we know Christ is coming to us in the form of the baby. This waiting space is more like the time in between the magi’s visit and Jesus’ baptism at age 30--time has passed, we know some stories but we are missing a lot of information. The good news I have to share today is that in all of the liminal spaces, on the margins of right and wrong, in the periods of waiting and wondering, in the questions and doubts and “what ifs” and “whys,” God is present with us. God meets us there, sees and knows us as we are, and offers us a radical, transformative love that calls us to be our best, whole selves and bring about the beloved community.

In Scripture, God is always meeting people in liminal spaces, at the edges of wilderness, the margins of cities, at dawn and dusk, and, as the gospel of Mark chapter 1 tells us, at the riverside. The gospel writer says,

“<sup>4</sup> John the baptizer appeared<sup>[a]</sup> in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with<sup>[b]</sup> water; but he will baptize you with<sup>[c]</sup> the Holy Spirit.” <sup>9</sup> In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved,<sup>[d]</sup> with you I am well pleased.”

John the Baptizer, the ancestor of our Baptist tradition, was a liminal figure. He was odd, portrayed as an archetypal prophet prophesying where the city meets the wilderness. He is down-to-earth, reminding us of our embodied-ness as we read that he dressed in camel’s hair and had a leather belt and that he ate

locusts and honey. He's someone that if you saw them walking around town, you might look twice at him and wonder what his story is. And if you heard him preach, you just might turn right around and go the other way to avoid him. John made people uncomfortable, calling people to repent of their sins, calling people to acknowledge their imperfections and the ways we harm each other as human beings. John the Baptizer, the Bible and other ancient texts tell us that he had his own following, he knew the boundaries of his own ministry. He was not the special savior from God, he was just preparing the way, making a path through the desert in the tradition of the prophet Isaiah. Everything about John tells us that John specializes in liminal spaces, as is the ritual of baptism.

Many traditions around the world have rituals involving washing one's body to symbolize purity or renewal. The baptism of Jesus reflects this style of ritual washing, as the Bible tells us that John the Baptist was known for doing this kind of thing, so much so that people would leave the city and come to him. John the Baptist practiced a baptism of confession and repentance. Today in Christian communities, baptism is also about proclaiming our faith and identity as followers of Jesus, a kind of rite of passage into some church communities. But it is important to note that Christian baptism, hearkening all the way back to the Jordan River, is foundationally related to confession and repentance. And for our Baptist tradition, we are named for this very ritual that Jesus himself experienced.

Jesus showed up at the river, along with other people, like you and me, normal people, to participate in this ritual of repentance. It is worth remembering that Greek word for repentance is "metanoia" which means something like "turning around." When we practice baptism, we are not only repenting of our sins, which I define as the ways that we deny the foundational beloved-ness of ourselves and others and Creation, but we are also dedicating ourselves to be part of a community that has turned around, that has chosen to "go home by another road," like the magi. In our baptism, we commune through the water with people who have seen the horror of violence, witnessed and endured the dehumanization of oppression. These people have acknowledged their complicity in the systems that perpetuate these tragedies, and they have chosen to live differently...and in our baptism that choice is open to us, too. We can echo the magi's prophetic actions of pursuing alternate paths than what is laid out by the powers that be. We can repent of the ways each of us has been complicit in some form of violence in our lives and dedicate ourselves to eliminating that violence from the face of the earth. We can embrace the voices of those pushed to the margins of what the white supremacist, capitalist cis-hetero-patriarchy deem "normal", those who call us to live beyond binary thinking and who pursue justice creatively and expansively.

In a recent Disney Pixar movie, a rather Shakespearean clown figure, Olaf the Snowman, mentions several times over the course of the film that "water has memory." And indeed it does. The movie even names that water the dinosaurs drank is the same water that is inside you and me and in our oceans, going through the water cycle and being used over and over again. The literal stuff of life in our cells has been recycled and recycled and recycled, bringing life into generations of humans, animals and plants. So when I say that we commune through the water with those who have gone before us, I mean it. And when I say we have a choice to make on how we repent, how we turn around and choose to live towards justice and humanity, I mean it. And when I say that God meets us at the borders and margins and edges and liminal spaces, in the in-between times of anxiety and wondering, I mean that with every fiber of my being. Just as the heavens split apart and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove transcended the boundaries of Earth and cosmos at Jesus' baptism, God's love reaches us here and now and in every situation of our lives. Perhaps not as dramatically as we see in this Scripture, but no less present and with no less love and grace.



Pastor Patricia invited you to have a bowl or cup of water nearby during this service. Please have that available now. I will read a litany and during this time, I invite you to dip your hands or fingers in the water when I say “remember your baptism.” If you have been baptized, I encourage you to remember the feeling of being immersed under the water or being sprinkled on your forehead. If you have not been baptized, I invite you to anticipate your baptism, using your creativity to imagine what it might feel like. As I speak, you may wish to anoint yourselves on your forehead or cheeks, or, if you have someone nearby, anoint them. You may wish to wash your face or your hands. Whatever is right for you, I encourage you to participate in this ritual with me.

Remember your baptism.

As we remember or anticipate our immersion into this community of followers of the Way of Jesus, know that this baptism, like water, contains the memory of millions, the memory of time, even this time right now that will sweep forward and flood into the future. May this water enliven us with the faith of our ancestors, those who came through the waters to freedom, those who repented of the sin of exploiting other humans, and those who sought new and different lives for their descendants. May this water empower us to risk loving each other and loving the world so much that we cannot fathom mistreating it and cannot stand by when it is desecrated by hatred, violence, war, and oppression.

Remember your baptism.

This baptism calls us to give our lives to the cause of justice. We know that this call is a dangerous one and doesn't necessarily resonate with the sanitized perception of “justice” many have today. The justice that Jesus sought was one that upended Empire by feeding thousands of mouths, healing hundreds of ailments, fighting exploitation in the name of religion, and, despite the best efforts of fearful political powers, could not be destroyed by death. This justice is worth fighting for. When we feel the water today, we remember John the Baptist proclaiming the way in the wilderness, letting all who would listen know that the world won't always be how it is now.

Remember your baptism.

This baptism is for all who seek to follow in the Way of Jesus. Not just those we agree with, but all who call on God's name for help and for mercy. We confess discomfort at the wideness of the welcome into this baptism, and yet we proclaim the good news that the Incarnate One accompanies us in all our human emotions of anger, confusion, frustration, pain; and in all our human experiences of being the outcast, the stranger, of isolation, of loneliness, of wanting to belong. As we push through this discomfort, let us honor the traditions who make use of water to cleanse, to refresh, to renew. We may come from different places to this riverside, but we meet seeking wholeness and fellowship.

Remember your baptism.

This baptism proclaims our identity as those who die with Christ, our hearts broken open for a world in pain, and those who rise with Christ, held in the arms of Love always, even beyond death.

Amen.

Friends, whenever you drink water or dip your head in the shower or wash your hands or see the rain or stroll along Puget Sound, remember (or anticipate) your baptism. Immerse yourselves in water's

memory, even the water that makes up your body. Let us, like Jesus our Brother, proclaim every day of our lives that another world is possible, and dedicate ourselves to bringing forth the kin-dom of God.

### Benediction

May the Lord Bless you and keep you.

May God's face shine upon you and be gracious unto you.

May God give you grace not to sell yourselves short,

Grace to risk something big for something good,

Grace to remember that the world is now too dangerous for anything but truth, and too small for anything but love.

May God take your minds and think through them.

May God take your lips and speak through them.

May God take your hands and work through them.

May God take your hearts and set them on fire.