

## Full Immersion

Mark 1:4-11

*Baptism of the Lord/ 10<sup>th</sup> January 2021*

After the events of this horrific, heartbreaking week, after all that we have read and heard and seen in the news—those images, we can't un-see those images of an angry, hateful mob, dirty drunk on a conspiracy cocktail of lies, delusions, and fear, incited by a paranoid president to storm the U.S. Capitol to "fight" and "take back our country," egged-on to obstruct the democratic process enshrined by our Constitution and subvert the will of the people. Yes, those images of a ragtag mob forcing their way into the Capitol, roaming through those hallowed halls with indifference, desecrating the people's house, destroying Federal property, traumatizing the members of Congress and staff, planning to take hostages, set off bombs, overwhelming, bludgeoning, and even killing Capitol police, setting their sights on Vice President Pence because he would not support the fantasies of a delusional president and support the insurrection—yes, all those images. After the events of this surreal, unreal, exhausting, disturbing, difficult, devastating, deeply unsettling week, I had the thought that the entire U. S. Capitol needs to be hosed down. Power-washed and cleaned—the floors, the walls, the desks, the ceilings, the dome, all of it. Someone needs to do an exorcism of the place. Burn a lot of sage. Reclaim the space, dissipate the fear and anger and cast out whatever evil still lingers there from Wednesday. Wednesday—which was also Epiphany. And what an epiphany it was, a revelation on so many levels. Yes, after the events of the week, maybe we all need to be hosed down and cleansed from what we have witnessed and heard and experienced—our eyes, our bodies, our thoughts, our souls need to be washed. We need a long, hot bath to wash away all that filth, all that hate. Yes, we need to be cleansed. Washed. *Baptized*.

Now, I'm not talking about the way we Presbyterians usually do baptisms, sprinkling a little water, making sure that we and the carpet don't get too wet. We are, after all, proper, decent, orderly folk. But sometimes something more is needed. I'm talking about baptism the Jesus way. I'm talking about baptism the John the Baptist way. He didn't sprinkle some water on Jesus's head and be done with it. And Jesus didn't just dip his toe into the water. No, it was *full immersion*: down and in the water, down and into the water, all of him, down under the water, down and in and then up and out. Washing away the past or all that might have held him back from his life's purpose and embracing the life of God. Death and resurrection.

And before you call the presbytery on me, I'm not suggesting that we install a pool in the sanctuary and require that everyone be rebaptized by immersion. Maybe you were baptized by immersion. That's not what I'm getting at. More than being literal, I'm talking symbolically, which is more important. I'm talking about something like the experience of baptism that is being required of us today. And by "us," I mean the church, the people who have been claimed by grace, who not only believe in Jesus but seek to *follow* him, those who bear the name of Christ and are passionate about walking the difficult and challenging way that leads to truth and life (John 14:6), the way of love.

When Jesus approached John the Baptist he requested to be baptized. He wanted to be washed. It was a decision, a conscious choice on his part to be *identified* with, *participate* in, and

eventually *embody* the way of God in the world: to serve, to preach, to heal, to live and even die for the kingdom or realm of God. Baptism is ultimately about vocation, it's about calling. It's about aligning your life with the life of God. It's about setting aside your personal agenda and taking up the work of God. It's about being fully immersed in and participating in the life of God that the Spirit is pouring into us and washing over us—the life, the work, the way of love and peace and wholeness and reconciliation and justice and healing and hope.

If you are baptized—*this* is what you've been baptized into.

If you are baptized—*this* is what you signed up for.

If you are baptized—*this* is what you said yes to.

And because we are fallen, broken creatures there are many times throughout our lives when we need to be reminded what baptism means and then recommit to it. Yes, there are times when we need to go back to the Jordan, there are times when we need to go down to the river to pray, go down and into the river, to get washed, get washed in the water and remember the time when we were first washed. There are times—because we have horrible memories—when we have to remember who we are and whose we are—the beloved children of God.

That's why renewing our baptism covenants or baptism vows, which we often do in the sanctuary on Baptism of the Lord Sunday, is really important for us. For, in respond to grace, we have to choose again and again who we are and whose we are and choose the type people we wish to be. One of the questions in the baptism renewal liturgy, as well in some baptism liturgies, especially when adults are baptized, is this: *Do you renounce evil and its power in the world?* And the answer is: *I renounce them.*

That's a heavy question to ask, but it reminds us that to be baptized, to be immersed in the life of Christ inevitably means that we have to be able to know and name evil when we see it and then be prepared to [renounce](#) it in our lives and in the world.<sup>1</sup> We need to be prepared to renounce all that defies God's love, all that distorts and disfigures the truth, all that "bears false witness" (Exodus 20:16), all that trades in lies and deceptions and conspiracies, all that distorts what is true, all that disfigures and dehumanizes God's beloved children. To renounce the power of evil, to disempower the forces of evil, to say *No* to everything and everyone that strives to negate God's love—this is nothing short of an exorcism.

Immediately after Jesus was baptized, the Spirit threw him into the wilderness to encounter the Evil One (Mark 1:12-13). Then the wilderness experience threw him into the purpose of his life and ministry, confronting evil, offering liberty to those possessed and held captive by what the letter to the Ephesians describes as "principalities and powers" (Ephesians 6:12).

I'm generally cautious about preaching on or about the latest news story. I prefer to step back a little and see how things unfold, get a fuller picture before suggesting how the gospel *might* have something to say to a particular situation. Sometimes events do not allow that, such as the events of this week. But we are still learning about what transpired on Wednesday, events

are rapidly unfolding, and since I'm preaching/recording this on Saturday morning a lot can happen in twenty-four hours. Still, something needs to be said.

Personally, like you, there was much about this week that was unsettling and has left us shaken. One thing that was and remains deeply disturbing for me was the fact that many members of that violent, angry mob embodying hate and evil believed that they were following Jesus up the hill—and that I really cannot fathom. Observers [said](#), “The conflation of Trump and Jesus was a common theme at the rally” near the White House.<sup>2</sup> Some that stormed the Capitol were clutching their Bibles. You probably saw the flags that read Jesus Saves or Jesus 2020 that mimicked the design of Trump flags. Or Jericho Marchers that arrived on Tuesday and started marching around the Capitol building, blowing shofars and shouting, like Joshua and his army that marched around the walls of Jericho to bring them crashing down. Many of these “Christians” also carried their white supremacist, racist banners. Rioting alongside people wearing Camp Auschwitz T-shirts portraying skull and crossbones.<sup>3</sup>

“So you have not learned Christ,” says the letter to the Ephesians (4:20). “So you have not learned Christ.”

On Friday, *The Atlantic Monthly* published a story tying together certain segments of Christianity and the attack on the Capitol and gave it the heading “[A Christian Insurrection](#).”<sup>4</sup> An unfortunate heading, really. For there was nothing of Christ there.

Some have said regarding what happened on Wednesday, “This is not America.” It was and is America—not all of it, to be sure, but it was and is America, and this hate and fear are in the soul of the nation, and they’ve been here for generations. And it’s also in the soul of the church. It’s been grown and cultivated and supported by toxic theologies taught in some seminaries and then preached in pulpits throughout this country for generations. *Theology matters*. How we approach the Bible matters. *Christianity Today*, one of the leading voices of American evangelicalism, denounced the insurrection, and [acknowledged](#) that Wednesday’s “atrociousness was in large part brought to us by the white, evangelical church in America.” The seditious mob, “reveals the horrid outgrowth of Christian nationalism, faulty spiritual formation, false teaching, political idolatry, and overriding ignorance.”<sup>5</sup> That’s quite a confession—epiphany. It goes without saying, of course, that no part of the Christian communion is without sin.

My point here is this—in the days and weeks ahead, which I suspect will be intense, that we take responsibility for ourselves, individually and together, that we examine our hearts and strive all the more to be faithful to Christ, to be fully immersed in his life. This is a time for the church to really be the church, a community clear about its commitment to Christ, fully immersed in his love and grace and compassion and justice. It’s a time to remember who we are and whose we. It’s time to renounce evil and its power. This is a *kairos* moment for the church, that is, a time of decision. Because when we step up out of the water, we need to be all the clearer about whom we serve and what it means to bear the name of the Risen Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Gench, “Can I Suggest an Exorcism?” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, January 5, 2021, <https://pres-outlook.org/2021/01/can-i-suggest-an-exorcism/>.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, “Mass Delusion in America,” *The Atlantic*, January 6, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/01/among-insurrectionists/617580/>.

<sup>3</sup> Robert P. Jones, “Taking the White Christian nationalist symbols at the Capitol riot seriously,” *Religion News Service*, January 7, 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/01/07/taking-the-white-christian-nationalist-symbols-at-the-capitol-riot-seriously/>.

<sup>4</sup> Emma Green, “A Christian Insurrection,” *The Atlantic*, January 8, 2021. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/01/evangelicals-catholics-jericho-march-capitol/617591/>.

<sup>5</sup> Tish Harrison Warren, “We Worship with the Magi, Not MAGA,” *Christianity Today*, January 7, 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/january-web-only/trump-capitol-mob-election-politics-magi-not-maga.html>.