***Beginning Anew***

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Season of Epiphany – Baptism of our Lord

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<https://youtu.be/JacfnVkszD0>

Mark 1: 4-11

Shalom to each of you this morning. May God’s Peace bless you this morning, and may the reflections that I share with you here this morning add to God’s blessing for you.

I would be remiss to avoid or ignore the events in our nation’s Capitol that occurred on the Day of Epiphany. As we move into the Season of Epiphany, I want to invite you to consider those events, not in light of your political views, or even your family teachings, but in light of your faith. So, this morning, I’m going to visit with you about our text from the Gospel of Mark, the story that is at the “beginning” of Mark’s Gospel. And in the midst of our looking at Mark’s teaching about baptism, I’m going to reflect with you about what I experienced as a mob that took over Congress’ Capital Building, or what we often refer to as the People’s House. And, please, consider reviewing the sermon a 2nd, and maybe even a 3rd time, if you find what I am saying hard to hear, or even offensive. My hope is that you will hear that I am speaking from my heart, from my soul, from my faith. And would truly appreciate hearing your reflections and questions from your heart, soul, and faith. I think that it is there, and not in an intellectual debate, that we are best able to see and to hear each other – maybe in new ways.

This past Wednesday we began another leg of our journey as we entered the Season of Epiphany. For the next 9 Sundays we will explore texts from Scripture that enable us to reflect upon our relationship with Jesus as the Christ --- the one we anticipated during Advent, we celebrated the birth of in Christmas, and now we are invited to learn from as we shape and grow in our faith. And I want to thank Rev. Josh Sawyer of FCC Omaha, and Rev. Steve Mason of SouthPointe CC in Lincoln for spearheading this effort to gather voices from around the Disciples Church to create a recorded worship service for each of the first 4 Sundays of Epiphany. And let me also express my gratitude for each person who agreed to participate in this joint venture so that all of our Disciple churches in Nebraska will have a chance to share in these joint worship services. And our clergy will have a chance to have a Sunday off – for some, it will be their first Sunday off since March of 2020, when the pandemic first affected our ability to worship in-person. This idea of a pre-recorded worship service is a unique concept that I hope we can continue to practice as a Regional Church in the future.

Let me begin this sermon by sharing with you a little bit about myself. I was born into the Presbyterian Church back in New Jersey, and didn’t enter the sanctuary of the church following my baptism until my father died – he was 42, and I was 7 years old. And I didn’t darken a church door again until I walked into my very first meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. That was at age 21, it was the Methodist Church in Athens OH, and I was scared to walk into the basement of that church.

A few years later, after being invited to have a relationship with God through the 12 Steps of AA, at the age of 24, I walked into the front doors of FCC Des Moines’ 1st worship service – my beginning with Church, and with DoC

At the age of 28 I began my seminary studies. And then, at the age of 31, I began to serve as an ordained minister at Madison CC in Frankton IN. Each Sunday I stood behind the Lord’s Table and called the people to celebrate Communion together. Being both someone who was un-churched growing up and unfamiliar with all of the practices and nuances of “being” church, and being a neophyte as an ordained minister, I stood behind that Table and invited people to come to “the” table. That seemed simple enough. But, It seems that some members saw me as being a bit too haughty for my own good. Because what they heard me doing was that “I” was extending the invitation to the Table. In essence they were saying, “How dare you!? This isn’t your Table to invite people to come around – it’s the Lord’s Table.” And, since most people who go to seminary were raised in the church, and most of them were raised in Disciple churches where Communion was celebrated each Sunday morning during worship, they simply knew -- -Communion was celebrated around the Lord’s Table, so we are simply extending an invitation on behalf of Jesus to come to his Table; to commune with him. While I’m not so grateful for the *way* church members chided me into learning that specific nuance, I am grateful for that lesson because it is more than a nuance, isn’t it?! The invitation to Communion comes only from our Lord, Jesus Christ. And not from any single person, or gathered people. We come to the Table because Jesus dined at this Table once, and ***he*** invites us to re-member that ***this*** is the Table where we can commune with him – again.

How did the church where you are worshipping come into being? How did it begin? And how did you begin with that church?

Maybe because I studied communications in college, I have come to believe that what we communicate with each other, the choices of our words, and the means of communication are important --- What we say – How we say it --- When we choose to communicate – Where we say what we say – I get caught-up in all of that --- but I also know that for many people, they simply say what’s on their mind - -sometimes it’s simpler, or easier to say “are you going to church this Sunday?” than to ask “Are you going to the worship service this Sunday?” It’s the same thing, really.

But is it? Isn’t it a bit like the words we choose at the Lord’s Table? When you hear the invitation to Communion, do you hear the minister or Elder inviting you to Re-member Christ’s broken body and shed blood? Or, do you hear Jesus extending a hand to you to come Commune with him? There’s more than a bit of a difference there. This is more than a distinction without a difference. Just as “going to church” is not the same as “going to worship.”

“I’m going to church” is a bit like saying “I’m going to a building.” And quite probably to go to a building where there will be people. And for many of us, it will be people who we know. Because the people are the church, after all. Remember that rhyme? Here is the church. Here is the steeple. Open the doors and see all the people. But when we collapse “going to worship on Sunday” into “going to church,” the effect is profound. Because we can begin to understand and believe that “going to church” is simply another place to go, like the store, or the club. It’s so normal that it begins to lose it sacred meaning.

So, now we come to baptism. Such a sacred act. A sacrament for many Christians. Because the ritual of baptism, we believe, bestows God’s grace upon the person being baptized. We Disciples, however, rarely talk about sacraments because we do not have Church doctrines, or dogma. We do not embrace a single set of beliefs or teachings. On baptism, or Communion, or the Bible.

So, for instance, when we celebrate Communion, Disciples do not believe that the bread and juice are transformed literally, physically, metaphysically into the body and blood of Christ. Instead, we tend to believe that the bread and juice hold a symbolic meaning – that is, the bread acts as a symbol for Christ’s body, but it is not seen as Christ’s body. The same is true for the juice – it is a symbol for Christ’s blood, but it is not seen as Christ’s blood itself. And then, each of us hold our own personal meanings of the bread and the cup, and of the Lord’s Table, and of the weekly and ritualistic practice of Communion itself.

The same notion is at work in baptism as is at work in Communion. And while we accept other forms of baptism, and some of our Disciple churches will allow the practice of baptism of an infant by sprinkling them with water, we Disciples historically have held to baptism by immersing the person in water. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But baptism is where we begin our faith journey, isn’t it? The traditional Church teaching is that in our baptismal waters our old life is shed, and we are raised into a new life. A new beginning.

Throughout this morning’s worship service we will be celebrating the baptism of our Lord. According to Mark, Jesus’ baptism marked a beginning for Jesus. Which is an important message for Mark. So much so that the first word of Mark’s Gospel is the very word, “beginning”. And Mark continues to work this idea of beginning as he reminds his listeners of Jesus’ parables, and miracles, and healing stories, and teachings. Again and again, Mark asks us to see the “beginnings” in Jesus’ life and ministry. And each time he reminds us of these “beginnings” he is inviting us to see anew; to allow these new ways of seeing and hearing to break into our sense about ourselves, to break into what we believe about our neighbors, and to break into our current understandings of the world’s realities.

On the Day of Epiphany, the whole notion of Democracy was rocked as a mob of people carrying the Confederate Flag, wearing shirts that said Camp Auschwitz, and other symbols that carry more than disturbing messages, broke into our Nation’s Capital and seized one of the three branches of our national government. This was the beginning of something. But what it marked as a beginning is not known. And as Christians who are citizens of this nation, we are fully engaged. My hope, though, is that you will not only view these events through the eyes of faith, but that the choices you make in the days, weeks, months, and years ahead will be shaped by your faith. Republicans, Democrats, Independent and non-voting people alike – the invitation is to explore what our faith teaches us. And the Season of Epiphany is a tremendous time to ask, again – maybe for the umpteenth time – “What does Jesus’ baptism, teachings, healings, and miracles teach us about what it means to be a follower of Christ?”

When Jesus was baptized, the veil was torn apart. Was this event, for instance, the ripping of another veil? Is this a chance to see more clearly? Have we been ignoring some realities that it is time to not only see, but look at and get curious about in new ways? What exactly does it mean for us to be a united states? What does it meant when we can no longer disagree, and still find a common ground upon which to move forward together? What happens to us as a people when we distance ourselves from people who are different, or think differently from us? Did the takeover of the Capital symbolize the ripping of our nation’s veiled story of Democracy? What are the truths that we are being asked to see, now? What are the voices – from the clouds above, or from within our hearts and souls – saying to us, now? Can we continue to hold hatred and still be united? Love the sinner – that is, those who are different from us – and hate the sin? Or has that cliché lost its meaning? Can we ignore the behaviors of some, if not many, and not hold them accountable? Can we hold people accountable with compassion, and not retribution? What is the measure of reason that is needed for us to move forward?

Dear Christians. Dear Church-goers. Dear Disciples – students, learners of Jesus’ Way. We can understand this, can’t we? Those questions have been circulating around the Church for a number of years --- ney, decades, even centuries. Well, actually, 2 millennia as witnessed in the Book of Acts and the conflicts that are described between Peter and Paul. We, the Church, have experienced the ripping of the veil, and being forced to see our own ugly truths about the Church itself since our beginnings. Many of us have tried to turn away from what was being revealed to us in church conflicts and divisions, in hopes that it would go away or correct itself. Others of us have simply left the Church, or that branch of the vine to go find another branch, or Church in which to worship.

Our baptism is much like the baptismal stories found in Scripture though – from Acts 8 and people who heard Phillip’s message and later the eunuch, and then Acts 16 and Lydia and her household and more. Being baptized is more than an act of the individual, though. It’s more than a single person responding by believing what they have been taught. It is an act of becoming a part of the community of believers. Where your faith will be shaped and formed – nurtured and challenged. Invited to open your eyes and ears to see and hear anew – whether you’re 13, 23, or 83 or 93. We are constantly being shaped anew. Beginning our journey each time that veil is ripped; each time that we are asked to let go of an old way of being, old ways of believing, and invited into a new way of being and living.

I believe that, as a nation and as a Church, we are being invited to look deeply at our sinful past in how we treat people who are different from what we as a nation have established as the norm. We have said from the very beginning of this country that the norm is what white, European Americans say and do. And within that narrative we believe that as long as we can maintain that posture, we are united as a country. But that view has been challenged – not only from the founding of this nation, but also from the establishment of this country’s first churches. There was a reckoning when the veil was ripped open in 1876 with the Emancipation of Black slaves, and it appeared that our nation was ready to embrace a new way of being. And Churches seemed ready to open themselves to a new way of being; to a new beginning. But it wasn’t ten years before the old ways of being were put back in place, and Black people were reminded that they were not white, nor of European descent. And the Church wrestled and divided – either in silence, or by seeking ways to bless their understanding of slavery. Nowhere was it more clear to us as the Disciples of Christ whose polar star was Christian Unity as a part of our movement divided and became the Church of Christ (non-instrumental). As the nation wrestles with coming to terms with its realities about what it means to be united in our differences as a single nation, so too does the Church. It seems that our differences are dividing us more than they are being celebrated as gifts.

Which brings us back to new beginnings. And sometimes, new beginnings come to us right in the middle of the story. Our story that we have told ourselves of what it means to be a Democracy, and our story of what it means to be a Christian, and our story of what it means to be the Church. It is not a new story with a new beginning – it is an old story that is being invited to begin anew.

Mark begins the story about Jesus in the middle. He invites his listeners to suspend any old ways of hearing the prophecies in the scrolls, or books like Isaiah, and tells the people that there is this man named John who fulfills what Isaiah prophesied about there being a forerunner to the coming of the Messiah. John tells his listeners that this forerunner will proclaim a baptism of repentance – that is, a message calling the people to turn away from their old ways, accept God’s forgiveness, and begin anew.

Mark depicts the unfolding of this new narrative as taking place at a beautiful river side where people from the countryside to the urban center of Jerusalem have joined together to witness this man who wore camel hair, eating locusts and wild honey. As I read the story this time I had this sense of our own denomination’s history with the Cane Ridge revivals where more than 10,000 people gathered at the Cane Ridge Church where people didn’t come to be baptized in the waters, but to be slain in the Spirit.

Mark doesn’t even hint at this possibility, but it seems possible that some of the crowds at the river Jordan simply came to see what all of the talk was about. And it’s possible that the talk that attracted at least some of the folks might have been the description of John – wearing camel hair clothes and eating locusts. In other words, I’m left wondering if at least some people didn’t simply come to gawk at John. Which is, in fact, a fulfilling of John’s role. John’s role was to draw attention to himself. Not because he was self-absorbed – please don’t mis-hear me that I’m talking about some person or personality in our national theater – Because John didn’t dress like that, or eat like that, or say things that were so unusual because he was so self-absorbed, but so that the people would have a chance to meet and come to know the one for whom John was “not worthy to stoop down and untie the thongs of his sandals”--- a responsibility of a servant.

Mark casts John as the forerunner, in fulfilling the Prophet of Isaiah. But by identifying that John wore clothes made of camel’s hair, and eating locusts and wild honey, he also was implying the John was like Elijah --- someone who also came from the wilderness, dressed in camel hair, ate funny foods, and spoke in a coarse language. And Mark opens his Gospel with the story of John whom we meet at the river Jordan as he is baptizing people from the crowd who had gathered together.

One-by-one people were being baptized – here comes another person…and another…and another…by the thousands, one-by-one, each person stepping into the river – putting their old life to death, and being raised into a new life, a new beginning --- even as miraculous as it was to see so many people’s lives being transformed right before their very eyes, many of the people in the crowd were bored --- and then comes this man named Jesus, the one John had said would be coming -- -one more human being, another person whose life would be changed forever – you can almost hear some of the yawns and mumblings of “ho hum” from the crowd --- Immediately, as Jesus’ head comes out of the water -- pay attention, listener, I’m going to let you in on a secret – the crowd will still be yawning, and ho-humming, but you, you the listener, you get to hear what they did not hear – Immediately, as Jesus was coming out of the water – as the people watched his head being lifted by John – it is in ***that*** moment, that Jesus had a new beginning --- because, as Mark tells us, ***he*** – that is, Jesus – ***he*** saw the heavens torn apart – ***he*** saw the Spirit descending like a dove upon him – ***he*** heard the voice from heaven say “***You*** are my Son in whom I am well pleased”

So, here’s where all of that talk earlier in this sermon brings us to look at the language that we use. When we baptize people today we do so in the name of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. And I want to know, what does that mean? What does it mean to you for you to have been baptized? What does it mean for the Church to baptize people who make the Great Confession? Do we have the authority to baptize both in the water and the Spirit? Or, is our authority as members of the Church limited to baptizing in the water? Let me ask it more pointedly --- Have you been baptized in the Spirit? // There are many views on these questions that have arisen again and again throughout the Church’s history. Which can become very confusing. Both because there are so many voices trying to claim a single teaching about baptism. And because we are so accustomed to the way that we have “always done” baptism. That any questions about how we baptize, and the meaning of baptism can be disconcerting, if not contentious.

For the remainder of Mark’s Gospel, his disciples struggled with understanding who this man, Jesus was – until the cross when, not one of his disciples, but the centurion mumbled “truly this man was God’s Son” (Mark 15:39).

During this Season of Epiphany, you are invited to join Jesus’ 12 Disciples, and the crowds, to learn who Jesus was. For you. To reflect upon his teachings, the miracles of his ministry, and the healing that he brought to people’s lives and explore who this fully human Jesus, and fully divine Christ is in your life. Blessings in your journey this Epiphany Season. May you experience the tearing open of any veils that keep you from seeing and hearing the Good News. May your faith be begin anew.