Sermon for Jan. 10, 2021

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(The text will also be posted soon at [dannybradfield.blogspot.com](http://dannybradfield.blogspot.com), and a video will be posted at [fb.com/bixbyknollschurch](http://fb.com/bixbyknollschurch))

"One Baptism" (Mark 1: 4-11)

I need to talk about the events of this past week. On Wednesday, the day of Epiphany, supporters of President Trump, encouraged by Trump himself, stormed into the U.S. Capitol. Their minds were filled with so many lies that Trump and others aligned with him have been feeding the American people ever since Election Day.

They smashed windows and caused other destruction. They displayed nazi symbols and waved confederate flags in the rotunda. Their violence led to five deaths. All while members of Congress took cover on the floors of their chambers before being evacuated to safety.

Law enforcement displayed an atrocious double-standard in dealing with the mob. The harsh tactics used against peaceful Black Lives Matter protesters earlier this year were replaced by calm courtesy, despite the fact that this was a much more violent and seditious attack, threatening the entire Senate, the entire House of Representatives, and American democracy itself.

And even though Trump condemned peaceful Black Lives Matter protesters and called them “thugs,” to those who violently stormed the capitol, Trump said: “we love you. You’re very special.”

America’s racism was on full display.

Some of those who stormed the U.S. Capitol carried signs that said, “Jesus saves” and “In God We Trust.” Others wore or carried crosses. They believed that God was and is on their side, and that Trump - despite all his immoral behavior - is God’s chosen one.

I don’t claim to know everything about God, but I do know this: God is not on the side of those who commit acts of violence. God is not on the side of those who persist in lies. God is not on the side of white supremacists.

I am incredibly saddened by the events of this past week. And I am especially angry at white, evangelical pastors - my fellow clergy - whose rhetoric helped motivate the mob, and who continue to fill the minds of their followers with dangerous, extremist lies that lead people away from the true teachings of Jesus….

Today is the Sunday after Epiphany, and every year on this day, the lectionary presents us with the story of Jesus’ baptism. Jesus was baptized by John, who (according to scripture) proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. To this day, Christians are baptized as a sign of their own repentance and their own need for forgiveness.

Today, our nation needs to be baptized. Our nation needs to repent. Our nation needs to seek God’s forgiveness.

Let me talk a little bit about our scripture reading. We heard that Jesus was baptized; but have you ever wondered why Jesus needed to be baptized?

Baptism is a sign of repentance and forgiveness. John proclaimed a baptism of repentance. And in the waters of baptism, we receive the assurance that God forgives our sins.

But what sins did Jesus have? What did Jesus need to repent from? The Bible says Jesus was sinless, the only human who ever existed who was without sin.

So why did Jesus need to be baptized?

For many years, the best answer I could come up with - and the best answer I would receive when I asked others this question - was that Jesus did it as a sign of obedience, as an example for us to follow.

I wasn’t totally satisfied with that answer, but it was the best answer I had, so I went with it.

But the reason I didn’t have a better answer to this question is because I didn’t have a better understanding of sin. And the reason I didn’t have a better understanding of sin is that the church has failed to fully understand what sin is, for at least the past several generations.

Like me, you were probably taught that “sin” is any action you do that goes against God. Sin, we were told, is an *individual* matter between you and God, and maybe one other person. Sin was most often committed *in private*. And the worst sins - (we were taught) - were the sins we committed in our bedroom, or in someone else’s bedroom.

But I have since learned that it's the sins we commit in public that matter most. It’s the sins we commit as a church, or as a society, or as a nation, that matter most to God.

The problem is that we have become so individualized, so private, in how we think and how we live. Modern America is the most individualized society the earth has ever seen. We don’t think in terms of “we.” We only think in terms of “me.”

But ancient societies - Biblical societies - thought more in terms of “we” than in terms of “me.” So sin wasn’t just personal. Sin was communal. Sin was social. Sin was systemic.

Reading through the writings of the Biblical prophets, one notices how often they refer to the sins *of the nations*. Nations sinned. Societies sinned.

And Jesus thought of sin the same way. Remember when Jesus separated the people like a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats? Scripture says he gathered *the nations* together, and he separated *the nations* like a shepherd separating sheep and goats. They were judged communally; collectively.

Which means that, for Jesus, sin isn’t just personal; sin is communal. Sin is social. Sin is systemic.

Even though Jesus himself was without sin, Jesus was born into a sinful world. A world that oppresses. A world that enslaves. A world that values power and wealth over human life. A world that abuses and mistreats the poor and most vulnerable populations.

Jesus was born into this world. He was born into society. And the sins of society were in the air he breathed and the water he drank. The sins of society were carried on the soundwaves that emanated from the mouths of Herod and Herod’s supporters; soundwaves that passed directly into his ear, causing his eardrums to vibrate with the sounds of that oppression and sin. There was no escape from that social, systemic sin, just as there is no escape from the social, systemic sin that plagues our own generation.

So Jesus didn’t need to be baptized for any personal sins of his; but because he was a part of the world, he did need to be baptized and he did need to repent because of the sins of the world. He did need to publicly turn away from the way of the world, and commit to following a different way; God’s way.

Once I understood this, I realized that spend too much energy agonizing over personal sins which we ourselves commit in private - including some things that people label sins which, in fact, aren’t even sins at all - and that we spend far too little time focusing on the sins of our society, our nation, and our world.

Yet, it is from these social, national, systemic sins that God is calling us to repent.

Racism is a social, systemic sin. Racism is also a personal, individual sin; but even people who are not guilty of racism on an individual level are guilty of racism on a social, systemic level. No matter how non-racist a person may be in their own, personal life, we are part of a racist society.

White people - like me - benefit from that. So even if a white person is completely innocent of racism at a personal level, we still need to repent from the systemic racism of the world in which we live.

To repent of systemic racism means that when the world is moving in a racist direction, we commit to moving in a different, non-racist - and even anti-racist - direction.

That’s what a lot of Christians fail to understand.

When we are baptized, we make a commitment to renounce all forms of sin and evil. It’s part of the liturgy. It’s part of the vows we make when we are baptized: to renounce all forms of sin and evil.

Which means that, as a baptized Christian, I need to renounce the sin and evil of those who perpetuate and disseminate the lies that incite people to violence and insurrection.

I need to renounce the sin and evil of those who threaten our democracy and who persist in white supremacy.

It’s not just *my* sin and *my* evil that I need to repent of. It’s the sin and evil of the world of which I am a part.

Remember: it’s not about just “me.” It’s about “we.”

That’s why Jesus taught us to pray: “*Our* Father, who art in heaven… forgive us *our* debts, as we forgive *our* debtors.”

And that’s why Paul, when he wrote his letter to the Ephesians and talked about our unity in Christ, said: “You…” (...and that’s a plural “you.” *Ustedes*, for those of you who understand Spanish; “y’all” for those of you from the South…” “You… y’all… are one body and one spirit, and there is one Lord, one faith, and one baptism…”

And it’s why Paul, when writing to the Corinthians, wrote that “if one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together...:”

So, when you read the Bible, and you see that word, “you,” 90% of the time, it’s really, “y’all.” It’s really *ustedes*. It’s a deficiency of the English language that we don’t really have a single word for this, for the plural “you.” And I’m not from the South, and it sounds really weird when I say “y’all,” but really, we should be reading our Bibles, “Repent, y’all, and be baptized… Y’all are the salt of the earth…” and so on…

So our repentance is not just a turning away from our own sin, but from the sins of society, and the sins of the nation. Our baptism is not just a baptism into new life for us, but new life for our nation, new life for the world.

Not all Christians get this. Certainly, those white, evangelical pastors who continue to stand by a morally bankrupt president do not get this.

But a growing number of Christians *are* starting to get this. A growing number of Christians are realizing that it’s not about “me,” but about “we.”

One of the *many* signs of this is the election of Reverend Raphael Warnock, pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church - MLK’s church - to the U.S. Senate. He knows it’s about “we.” Those who elected him know it’s about “we.” It’s about all of us. Together.

And they know that if it’s about “we,” then things like overcoming racism are important, and things like social justice are important, and things like building bridges instead of walls are important.

And they are being joined by people of other faiths - Jews and Muslims, and others; people of every race, including immigrants; people of various sexual orientations and gender identities… all these diverse people, working together, to confront the sins of our society and the sins of our nation, to create a more perfect union, to create a better world, a beloved community, a nation of healing and unity.

This is the holy work to which we are called, by virtue of our baptism.

We *can* repent of the evil we have witnessed, and we can turn to a new way, the way of Jesus, the way of unity, and compassion, and love for all humankind.