

some sense of the ending we intend: to live in a way that honors that realm of God, which is marked by peace and love and the presence of Christ. And so let your star word be a beginning that points you toward that end. How might that specific word lead you there? How might following Jesus, with a focus on that word, steer you toward an ending that feels Spirit-filled?

As we remember the promises of baptism and the beginning of our journey following Jesus, we can do so with anticipation for all that is to come, knowing that the Spirit guides us and God goes with us.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

January 7, 2024

Baptism of the Lord Sunday

“Beginning with the End in Mind”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Mark 1:1-20

There’s a scene in the movie *Talladega Night* when Will Ferrell’s character prays at the dinner table. He makes his prayer to ‘sweet little baby Jesus.’ And then over and over again he prays to ‘tiny little infant Jesus.’ As the prayer drags on, his character’s wife interrupts to say that Jesus was not a baby forever. He grew up, became an adult. She wants her husband to stop calling Jesus a baby. But Ferrell insists that he likes the *baby* Jesus best and that’s the one he is going to pray to, no matter what.

Most of us love the sweet little baby Jesus of the manger scene. But we know, too: Jesus grew up. He challenged authorities. He turned expectations on their heads. He asks something of us. Today, we move away from the infant Jesus to journey with the grown up Jesus. As we read Mark’s gospel, we see there is no tiny little infant Jesus, anyway. As a storyteller, Mark is always in a hurry. So he dives right into the action when Jesus was already a grown up. Mark starts the story with a declaration: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.” Obviously, it’s the beginning because we’re at the start of the book. But Mark probably meant more than just the obvious. He meant that this whole story he’s telling—of Jesus’ ministry, and even his death—was just the *beginning*, the *tip of the iceberg* of the good news. We’ll see, when we get to Easter, that Mark’s gospel doesn’t have a neat and tidy conclusion. Things remain open-ended once the tomb is found empty. So when Mark started writing, he began with the end in mind. He knew his story was not yet finished, by any stretch. The account of Jesus’ life and death that Mark wrote down was just the beginning. Jesus’ story—God’s story—continues all around us. The good news is still unfolding among us. God’s reign is, even now, taking shape.

The beginning of this beginning was Jesus’ baptism by John. John was out there doing what other prophets of his time were doing, too: offering a ritual cleansing. But John’s ritual went farther. He offered a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He declared that God was up to

¹ William C. Placher, *Mark* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 21-22.

something new; that God was about to intervene in the world, and it was time for people to get on board. John knew that Jesus was both the sign and the embodiment of this coming reign of God. And so John's deference to Jesus was extreme.

But if this was a baptism of repentance that led to forgiveness, what was Jesus doing there? Surely *he* didn't *need* to repent or be forgiven. This issue has caused theologians a lot of angst since very early on in the church. Early Christians were embarrassed by Jesus' baptism, which seemed to be at odds with what they were declaring about Jesus: that he was God's child; that he was sinless; that he *was* God.

To help explain this issue, some theologians determined that Jesus' baptism had some other purpose, too. Way back in the 4th century, archbishop Gregory of Nazianzus wrote that what was being cleansed at the river that day was not Jesus. Rather, the cleansing went in the other direction. Just like a leper touching Jesus and being healed, Jesus touched the water and made it holy.¹ It's a mystical idea. But there is something to it. We believe that the Holy Spirit touches us through the presence of ordinary water when the sacrament of baptism happens. The water, touched by Christ, is part of our ritual to begin a life of service and discipleship.

When Jesus emerged up through those baptismal waters, he looked and he saw the heavens torn apart. It's a jarring image. That same action of tearing will happen later on when Jesus breathes his last breath on the cross: "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." It's the same action at Jesus' baptism and at his death; the same barrier between heaven and earth was torn. The beginning of Jesus' ministry already points us toward the end of his life. Both of these rendings, tearings show that something serious has shifted. The barriers that existed between humanity and God have been removed. Nothing divides us now. God is on the loose among us. That should leave us feeling both awe for God's goodness, and maybe a little hesitant, about just what God might ask of us.

Soon after his baptism, the next phase in Jesus' ministry began: the calling of disciples. It happened quickly, like so much in Mark's gospel. Jesus said 'follow me' and boom, they did. It's hard to imagine that for us. No goodbyes? No explanations, no seeing if their father could manage the family business without them? They just put down what they were doing and followed Jesus. But Mark wants us to understand that the disciples saw something powerful in Jesus. There was something about him that drew them in—something holy, something divine. Their willingness to

begin this journey was because they could see something about where it was headed. Not that they understood it correctly or could explain it. But that this beginning was one they undertook because of where they thought it might lead. In Jesus, they saw something of God's realm and immediately, they wanted to join their lives to it.

For us, baptism is a beginning. It is a once and for all starting point, where our belovedness is established. Where we make clear that we turn our lives toward Jesus. It is the beginning of our discipleship, whether we are babies or children or teenagers or adults. Love and blessing are the point; but they are only the beginning. And that beginning points us toward the eventual ending we are yearning for. Which is something like what those disciples saw in Jesus: the presence of God among them; the realm of God come to earth. That ending is not just what we want for ourselves as individuals, but about where history as a whole is moving; where we pray the trajectory of creation is heading. Toward a realm revealed most clearly in Jesus. A realm where all humanity and all creation are beloved. A realm where we are not separated from God by any barriers, but where God is here among us: celebrating, suffering, comforting, transforming. A realm where people do not seek to be served, but rather to serve. A realm where peace with justice reigns. That is the ending we are seeking when we begin our lives in discipleship. It's what we recommit to each time we witness a baptism, or remember our own baptism, or rededicate our lives to Christ.

Those beginnings launch us into lives of discipleship: discipleship that has that greater end in mind, but is utterly focused on the needs around us, just like Jesus faithfully served the needs around him. Being a disciple is about the service we will render; the love we will share. And of course, the glimpses of God's realm we will see, and the hints of it we will experience, as we follow Jesus.

This is the time of year we consider endings and beginnings. We've closed out 2023 and are a week deep into 2024. Some of us are setting intentions for the new year about how we want to act, who we want to be. Today, when you come up for communion, we will each receive a star with a word on it. These tie to the story of Epiphany when the Wise Ones, or the Magi or the Kings, followed a star to find baby Jesus. To dig into the story, I hope you'll come to the youth-led service in Birmingham tonight at 5pm. Star words are an annual tradition here. You don't get to choose your word; we simply receive what the Spirit offers. The word is not meant to define you or say anything in particular about you, in this moment, today. The word is just a beginning, an entry point to ponder and pray about this year. We have no idea what the end of this year will bring. But we may have