

The Baptism of our Lord, B
Genesis 1:-5
Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:4-11

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The week we have lived through seems surreal. And that's saying a lot, considering how much surreal stuff we've experienced this past year! But Wednesday was a new low, with rioters invading the US Capitol, threatening legislators and holding up the final certification of our presidential election. People lost their lives. It was madness.

Many of us were glued to televisions all Wednesday and Thursday, or maybe like me you were doomscrolling on your phone to catch every breaking news story, just trying to understand and process these events. Many Americans found it profoundly shocking. The general reaction was: "This isn't who we are --we're better than this!" But unfortunately many others were not surprised, including people of color. People who've been working for racial justice have already tangled with these destructive currents in our culture – not only the notorious white supremacists and deluded QAnon conspiracy theorists who rioted on Wednesday, but the wider masses behind them who resonate with the call to "take back their country" from people they don't think deserve to be here, immigrants, non-whites, and more.

Dr. Valerie Bridgeman, a Black seminary professor in Ohio, observes that "White grievance and rage are baked into the DNA of our nation." (*Chaos in the Capitol*, Church Anew blog, 1/8/2021 www.churchanew.org/blog) It's something our country needs to reckon with. Grievance and rage are easily provoked when power begins to shift, as it is these days. Our national brew is getting stirred up, currents both old and new are coming to the surface. The hope we hold onto as Christians is our trust that somehow God's creative Spirit is also at work in this stirred-up mix, that people committed to justice will be strong and brave enough to rise up too. That forces of destruction will be met with the constructive activity of God's Holy Spirit.

This week, this morning, our heads are spinning and our hearts are aching. And so we come to church. We come to hear a good word. We come to sing songs of faith and pour our hearts out in prayer. We come to receive bread and wine with our Lord's promise to draw near and commune with us. We come to remember who we are and who God is – God is the Creator of Life, the Savior of humanity, the Sustaining Spirit of the Universe, who works everywhere and always to heal what is sick, and liberate what is bound, and make whole what is broken.

We come this morning to find grounding for our spirits. And we will not be disappointed. Oh, you might be disappointed in my sermon, but you will never be disappointed in the presence and promise of God, who gave you life and will never leave you. God will never leave this hurting world of ours. God is always a ready help in times of need.

Something significant happened to me on Thursday evening. You might think it's small, but it brought my spirit home somehow. After days of bad national news and challenges on many levels, our household got connected up by Zoom with members of this congregation. It was just an ordinary Zoom choir rehearsal and a committee meeting to plan worship, just a few people meeting up through squares on a screen, but God's Spirit was there. And while we were meeting, two messages came in from other members -- messages of simple hope. Svetlana Karlin texted to say her health is better, she can walk around her room now, she couldn't do that before. Gary Andeen emailed to say he was home from the hospital after a mild stroke, ready to get going with some therapy. Hallelujah! I was reminded that healing does happen. Even while malignant forces tear things down, God's power continues to heal and build up. And we know where our hope lies.

I find that one of the toughest challenges in Christian faith to keep on believing in the power of goodness and love, while the world showcases deception and selfishness and hatred. Yet we Christians do believe God is good. We believe God created this universe and called it "good." We believe God loves this good creation, loves us, and cares what happens to us – all of us, even the planet itself.

This morning Ryan read us the very first words of the Bible from Genesis, the poetic account of God creating all things. How "in the beginning" the Spirit of God – a wind from heaven – moved over an earth imagined as completely covered with water. God's Spirit moved over the waters, and God said "Let there be light!" – and God saw that it was good. From the very beginning, God called this earth "good." And from the very beginning, God's Holy Spirit has inhabited and infused the earth. The same Holy Spirit who guides and encourages us today.

One proof of God's goodness is God's own Son, who was born among us and didn't shy away from even the most terrible human pain, who even went through death, so he could rise out of death and unite us with our Creator forever.

Some days we could name a hundred reasons to be cynical or despair, but we also have this one shining image of Jesus Christ to give perspective in the struggle. God loves us --

and God loves the world – no matter what. And God is always working, mysteriously, relentlessly, to heal this universe and make it new.

This morning, scripture gives us another reason to believe in goodness and love. And that reason is baptism. Baptism brings God's love close to home for each one of us. Just as it was for Jesus long ago, it is for us today.

Baptism is one definite point in our lives when God reaches out to touch each one of us and claim us and assure us that we have value and are loved. God reaches out to say, *"This precious person is mine. I take her into my family. I claim him in love. I wash them with water. I mark her with the cross. He belongs to me and can never be parted from me."* And in that moment, in that event of baptism, we find out who we really are, and how things really are.

In baptism, God addresses that deep, essential longing within each human being to know that we are loved and accepted, that we matter, that we have value. It's something that every person needs, something every hungry heart longs for – including the masses of angry, hurting, hungry hearts we have seen on display in our nation this week. Every person needs to belong and be loved, be seen. Maybe that's a way forward for us.

I personally appreciate how definite baptism is. Because my own opinion of myself can be very changeable. Sometimes I feel capable and strong, other times I feel weak and lost. In one area of life I may consider myself successful, while in another area I may feel like a complete failure. Sickness or stress or trouble can cause me to doubt myself and doubt my purpose in the world.

That's when baptism comes as a wonderful word of truth from outside myself. An objective truth. A wider, stronger word from God that overshadows all my fickle opinions. Baptism tells me that whether I am pleased with myself or disgusted with myself, God accepts me. Whether I am brave or scared, God loves me. Whether I am wise or foolish, God values me. No matter how I judge myself and no matter how the world judges me, God claims me as God's own. God treasures me because I am God's beloved child. Definitely not perfect, but always precious in God's sight. And always helped by God's Spirit, never left alone. That's who I am in baptism. That's who you are in baptism, too.

And the good news of Baptism is wider than just a personal message or affirmation. Baptism is the sign of God's Holy Spirit alive in the world – alive in people who are valued and blessed and claimed and empowered and guided by the God of love and justice, peace and forgiveness, generosity and trust, compassion and courage. God's

Holy Spirit moved over the waters of a newborn world – and still moves in our weary world today. God's Spirit moved over the baptismal font of water from which you were blessed and claimed – and still moves in your life today, urging you toward compassion and clarity and confidence and courage.

I know a man who swims for exercise, and when he's doing the backstroke, he imagines himself surrounded by the waters of God's baptismal love. He feels waters of love holding him up, waters of love washing over him, waters of love refreshing him and giving him enjoyment and even leading him to better health.

When you're standing in the shower some morning, remember your baptism. Welcome that warm, wonderful water that soothes your skin and makes you feel new. Give God thanks for having all that abundant water, right in your home! And give God thanks even more for the abundant love of God every day, ever-flowing, supporting your life. Every day an opportunity to be God's person anew.

Martin Luther knew how to remember his baptism. He needed to, because throughout his life he wrestled with depression and anxiety. Back in the 1500's they didn't call it depression, but I'm sure Martin's dark times were no different than ours today. And when those personal demons threatened him, it's said that Martin Luther would actually shout out loud: *"No! I am baptized! I am saved! I belong to God, not to you demons!"* Luther called upon God's baptismal promises for protection and strength.

We can lean on our baptism this way, too. When the demons threaten, whatever they may be, we can let God's love push back the darkness. We can say, *No! I am God's person. It's God's love that rules in my life.* And I am never alone – we are never alone – humanity is never alone, in facing whatever comes, from the smallest to the greatest challenges, from the personal and everyday to the nation-shaking and world-shaking. Because God's Holy Spirit, moving over the waters long ago, is still moving today.

Thanks be to God. Amen.