

Psalms 139:1-18

Mark 1:4-11

Rev. Irene Pak Lee, preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen, January 7, 2024

Beloved God,

Through the pages of scripture, you have sprinkled your love for us like an echoed refrain. Despite its repeated truth, we too often allow that good news to roll off of us like water, barely allowing it to touch us. Make today different. As we come again before your Word, let the truth of your love for all of creation seep into our bones. May we hear your echoes of “beloved” deep within us and respond with overflowing joy. We are here. We are listening. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our Rock and our Redeemer, Amen.

Wildly Beloved

This past week, I spent a few days with a group I’ve been a part of for a few years now called the Moveable Feast. We are a group of ministers who gather annually and we prepare for our time together by writing academic exegetical papers on scripture and present them to an invited Old or New Testament scholar who then shares their reflections on our paper. It’s the most intimidating group I’ve ever been a part of (they’ve been going since the 80s), and I’m always anguishing the paper I have to write and wonder if I truly belong in the group and then I always come away stimulated and renewed not only intellectually but in heart and spirit.

Because I was deeply immersed in at least 15 different biblical texts this week and scholarly thought, I didn’t have time to fully absorb that I was approaching one of my last Sundays here at Stone. As we were leaving, reality hit me as each of my colleagues gave me a hug and blessed me and wished me well as I come into my last two Sundays at Stone. And so friends, here I am in the pulpit knowing that I have only this preaching moment and one more next week to preach to you. Can I just tell you that this feels super daunting? It’s daunting and sad and hopeful and filled with so many mixed feelings. It doesn’t feel quite real yet either, right? It’s not just me? Thankfully, today offered me the gift of a liturgical day to help me think about how to frame a word for you as we remember the baptism of Jesus.

We’ve just come out of the Advent and Christmas season, and technically Epiphany was just yesterday when we remember the wise ones who follow the star

and come to see Jesus with their gifts. And then today we jump pretty far ahead all the way to the baptism of Jesus by John.

In the 4 gospels that we read about Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection, Mark is the only gospel that does not start with the birth story. Mark 1:1 begins this way: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" and jumps into John the Baptist in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. There's no baby Jesus, no manger scene, no bewildered shepherds or angelic proclamations, no magi, no Mary and Joseph. Nope. None of that. For the gospel of Mark, the *beginning* of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, God with us, God incarnate, begins at his baptism.

I think this is actually pretty powerful. I mean, I love a good birth story and I love the drama of the angels and stars and shepherds, but Mark starting out Jesus' story in the wilderness and being baptized by John is pretty radical. John the Baptizer appears in the wilderness-that is, he was not conducting his ministry in Jerusalem or in a temple where religious life was central. Instead, scripture tells us that he was drawing people AWAY from the center of where they understood God to be and to repent and be baptized in the wild. He was drawing them out into the margins where people didn't normally go to find God.

Amazingly, crowds were responding to this invitation. Scripture tells us that "People from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem" went out to be baptized by John in the Jordan River. Think about this for a second. A man who ate bugs and was dressed in camel hair was compelling people OUT of the city-out of the center and into the margins-into the unfamiliar wilderness.

Theologian Debie Thomas says in her commentary about this passage that it's easy for us to miss the significance of what it means that people were leaving the city to go to the wilderness for John. She writes, "Jerusalem was the beating heart of Israel's spiritual life. The temple was *the* place to go to meet God, and rituals of purification by water were already a feature of Jewish devotional life. But something in John's message compelled a whole population to leave their religious epicenter for spiritual nourishment and rebirth. Something authentic and fresh resonated for them in the movement away from the center of institutionalized

dogma and authority. Whatever God was about to do necessitated a decentering. A disruption. A shift away from business as usual.”

We as a church are in the midst of some big transitions. We are used to things running a certain way and being a certain way in this place... it's known and it's comfortable and I know I've been a part of what you also know for a little over a decade now. It's easy to be fearful and worry about being called away from business as usual. Change is hard. But I wonder if there might be a voice calling to *all* of us from the wilderness that is asking of us to move away from what we've centered here in this place, or even within our own lives individually, that we need to pay attention to in order to prepare the way for what God is about to do-within your life and mine. Easier said than done, I know.

But friends, often, I think, the most daring and compelling calls for justice, healing, peace making and truth telling come from the outside. Voices calling for life and wholeness for the earth and for marginalized peoples don't usually come from well established organizations or places of power but from the marginal ones. Can we hear them? Can we hear new voices calling to us from unexpected places that might draw us closer to what God wants to do in and through us?

And here's what's truly amazing to me about this beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. That's where he starts too. Jesus' story begins not in the center of where all the things are happening or where we might expect the son of God to appear. Whether his beginning story is in a stable with no one but shepherds to receive the good news or here in Mark's gospel IN the wild wilderness, our God chose to appear and begin God's story among us decentered, and not at all where folks might have hoped for or expected or wanted a Savior to appear.

Friends, that Jesus chooses to walk into that wilderness, far away from the routine and familiar and then get in line behind tax collectors and sinners to receive the same baptism of repentance-it's a radical and wild act.

Christian historian John Dominic Crossan writes about the fact that Jesus' baptism was an "acute embarrassment" for the early Church. Apparently, what scandalized the Gospel writers was Jesus' decision to receive a baptism of *repentance*.

Repentance for what? Wasn't the Son of God perfect? Sinless? Holy? What was the Savior doing in the murky water of the Jordan River, aligning himself with the great unwashed? And why did God choose *that* sordid moment to tear the cosmos apart and call Jesus "beloved?"

Debie Thomas expands our understanding and continues with that question, "Why *did* the Son of the Most High get in line for baptism behind the tax collectors and sinners — the very folks who could sully his reputation? Why didn't he care about appearances? About disgrace? About guilt by association? Aren't God's children supposed to care about such things?"

She continues, "Apparently not, because Jesus's first public act was an act of radical solidarity. An act of stepping into intimate, inextricable, "shameful" relationship with sinful humanity. Instead of holding himself apart, instead of protecting his own purity, Jesus stepped into the same water we stand in, and wedded his reputation and his destiny to ours."

Church, in this act, Jesus enters into the messy, hard and unpredictable ways of being human. He becomes one with us and in our own baptisms, we vow to do the same. In our own baptisms and remembering our baptisms-every time we baptize a child, teenager or adult, we join ourselves to each other and vow to care for one another. Baptism asks that we bear the risk of belonging. The risk that others might hurt us. The risk that others will change or that they will change us.

And here's what's beautiful about all of this, even when it's hard to accept. This moment of baptism performed by an outsider in the wilderness is the moment when God declares Jesus beloved. I want to make sure you notice something here: God is well pleased with Jesus *before* his ministry begins. God declares beloved before anything is accomplished, before anyone is healed, before Jesus has "proven" anything to anyone. Friends, this means that you could miss every goal, fail every test, feel completely undeserving, not having proven your worth, and still be God's beloved. It's the act of solidarity with humanity, stepping into those waters in the wilderness and choosing to care about it is what opens up the heavens and proclaims love upon him...it's what proclaims love and belovedness upon us.

And so friends, as we come into a new year and walk through a season of change, I challenge you to listen for the voices in the wilderness-those voices calling to us

for justice, mercy, peace and love from the margins, and to walk there. We might not be able to see the whole pictures but we can still listen for those voices and call. Move toward them and find your path connecting you with your neighbor.

May we, during this season and always as we follow in the footsteps of Christ Jesus, then find ourselves also joining him as he stands in line at those waters of baptism, willing to be one with all of humanity, even those who are broken, hurting, and crying for mercy. In doing so, may we also hear and know deep within our being how God delights in us, how deeply beloved we are by our incredible God and may we respond from that love in all that we say and do. Amen.

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Mark 1:4-11

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

BENEDICTION

Friends, voices still cry out from the wilderness places, calling us to join in the waters of solidarity with all people-especially those on the margins. As we go into this week and from this place, may you hear the call and move toward them, knowing that even before you go, before you respond, before you accomplish anything, that you are already God's beloved. May you respond from your place of belovedness. And may the grace of our Lord JC, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always.