

Blessed Too! January 10, 2021

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The Gospel of Mark 1:4-11

4 And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. 6 John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8 I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

9 At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. 11 And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

[message begins]

I read this quote last week by Father Richard Rohr "A good journey begins with knowing where you are and being willing to go somewhere else."

So, where we are on this Sunday, January 10th, 2021? Most of us probably take time to reflect at the beginning a new year, review the previous one, create resolutions, set goals, or visions for what we hope will be in the new year.

Last week, in Pastor Patty's epiphany sermon, she talked about the North Star, and how because of its position, it doesn't appear to move in an otherwise always changing sky. Therefore, from time immemorial it has served as the navigational star. The steady North Star can be used to help us determine our location and set our course. Pastor Patty said "I realize now, perhaps as much as ever in my life how important it is to get our bearings. To realize when we are off course."

The beginning of the year makes a nice, clean, fresh start, to recalibrate, to pray and discern, to orient ourselves toward God and set our course. And now, especially seems to be a good time to ask, where do we go from here? Individually, as church community, as a country, as humanity.

We are facing so many serious challenges as a country right now, as well as global humanitarian crises. Just last week, a shocking scene occurred as a mob stormed the U.S. capitol in an attempt to overthrow the 2020 election.

Just last week, again, a record number of Covid deaths occurred in this country.

And within the last 6 weeks, two black men were killed by police officers here in the Columbus area. As our country has spent the last 10 months grappling with the devastating consequences of institutional racism. And the list goes on.

Yet, there is another story unfolding for us simultaneously. And it's the one we began again last November 29th when we started walking through another year of our Christian story. And it's a story actually without an end or beginning. It's God's story, the bigger story – the other one we live inside of, the one that is the North Star for Christians.

A story of hope and grace, redemption and forgiveness, resurrection and love, blessed and blessing. The story of tragic human flaws and frailties, and also Divine guidance, and intervention revealing a sure and certain loving intelligence.

While our world's news steadily provided covid and election updates, we were listening to angels sing and watching for the bright star in the night sky. We journeyed with shepherds and magi to gaze with awe upon the Christ child in the manger, and again affirm, God is surely with us.

In our Christian tradition, we repeat, revisit and reenact our wonderful, holy and mysterious stories each year. If you've been around church long, these stories are familiar to you, so why do we repeat them?

Though the stories seem the same, we are always moving. Our location in the universe isn't fixed, we're not where we were last year. This year the story will reveal to us something we couldn't hear or see from our perspective last year. We get to be drawn into it in a new and deeper way where more is revealed.

Last week, as we celebrated Epiphany, the wise magi made a special effort to get my attention and share their message, which they did, with the help of a special Maple Grove friend. In their wisdom they gave me very simple, yet powerful lesson, that took on a new meaning for me during these times --- they instructed me to follow the light. At a time when I was putting so much of energy and attention on trying to make sense of pain, division, brokenness and evil– I needed to be guided back, to align again with God, with love, with light.

And our journey with Jesus continues. These weeks leading up to Lent are intended to help us see God still reveals God's self with us and among us. We hope we will better understand ourselves as both human and spiritual beings and connect more deeply with our True Selves through these weeks of worship.

As we aligned our inner orientation towards God, our outer steps are revealed. We hope we can each gain some clarity about our purpose and our values. That we will be better able to hear the voice of our God self and distinguish it from the voice of our small self. That we will grow in our ability to see from God's broader, more encompassing perspective, recognizing that we live in a world that hold both deep sin and sorrow as well as abundant love and grace. We are undertaking this work to help us live in ways that are healthy, empowered, meaningful and life-giving.

That's an aspirational goal to be sure, but by the grace of God, we are always being drawn into a truer, healthier relationship with God, self and others.

So, we turn now to today's scripture for the next step of this journey. In the Gospel of Mark, we begin by meeting Jesus at the Jordan river. John the Baptist is preaching a message of repentance and forgiveness, crowds of people are lining up, confessing their sin and being baptized. Their lives and hearts are changed.

When Jesus steps forward to be baptized by John – we witness yet another epiphany. We heard in the scriptures today, that as Jesus was coming up out of the water, the heavens open and the Spirit descended like a dove on him. And a voice from heaven spoke, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." In the Eastern Orthodox Church, Epiphany is a celebration of the baptism of Jesus.

God names and claims Jesus. And we are invited to the waters too, to be blessed and claimed as sons and daughters. Though blessed as God's son, over 100 times Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man, sometimes translated as the Human One or Everyman. Jesus spills God's blessing on us, including all of us as God's beloved children. And at our baptism, we affirm being One with Christ, being children of God.

That's the God story, we too are blessed. And we also have our own sacred stories, our stories of blessing. The times we realize God came near; God reached out to us. Sometimes in dramatic ways, or it may be very gentle and quiet. Sometime in a whisper, a feelings, other people. Sometimes we don't even know it until we look back over our lives and we can see how we were cared for, or carried, or were placed where we needed to be, we were given signs, we were guided to encounters and nudged to action, or we had a deep knowing – a divine knowing. That is your blessing to claim.

In my family of origin, there is a story about my brother Chad Hale, he's the oldest of us six siblings. Now, like the four gospels, probably each of my siblings will have their own version of this story but today you get to hear mine.

My mother said that when Chad was born, he was a “blue baby” and medically that means he was not getting enough oxygen, and therefore has a bluish hue to his skin. My mother said the cause was a hole in his heart. She said he was in the hospital for weeks, they weren’t even sure he would live, and the story goes, if he made it out of infancy, one day he’d need heart surgery and would still likely die at a young age.

However, my mother said she prayed and prayed and told God, if you let my baby live, I promise I will give him back to you. Well, my brother did live. As a matter of fact, he’s 75 years old now. He never had that heart surgery; he’s been very healthy all of his adult life.

Additionally, my brother became Rev. Chad Hale. He received his Master of Divinity at Andover Newton, served for a while in New England, then moved and has spent decades serving communities in inner city Atlanta, being a church pastor, community leader and founding a nonprofit, now called Urban Recipe, that not only connects people with food but with God and community and now author. He has devoted his life to serving God. I grew up with this story that my brother was given back to God, and from my perspective, my brother lived as though he knew he belonged to God.

Please hear me, I am not saying this is a formula for overcoming life threatening illness.

I am saying that knowing our blessing, helps us know who we are and to whom we belong, and how we shall live.

And I wonder, how has God blessed you? Been present to you? Called you?

You, being here now, tells me God is moving in your life and you have responded to God’s call to connect with this community. I’m so glad you have and I’m grateful that we have been called together. I love and appreciate this community and what God is doing with us and through us.

I want to encourage us to begin this year, attentive to, and aware of God’s story, to God’s love, to God’s blessings and to our True identity and higher call.

Mystic Thomas Merton said “To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that love is the reason for my existence, for God is love. Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name.”