

Karen Hollis
January 7, 2018 Sermon
Mark 1:4-11

Let us pray, May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh God our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

This passage and I are old friends – this is actually the very first passage on which I ever preached and it is the passage I have preached on the most . . . why, you might ask? Because this is a Sunday in the liturgical year that pastors consistently want off! They're still exhausted from Christmas, so I have filled in on this Sunday a good handful of times!

Yesterday was the festival of Epiphany, a day in the church year where we celebrate the manifestation of God's presence with us. We are past the mystery of Jesus' birth, the awe and wonder, the light in the darkness that will not be overcome. While these images are hope for the ages, they don't yet have flesh on them, they have no shape or direction. In Epiphany we move from a vision of dreams to real possibilities. And the first story we hear in the readings is about Jesus' baptism, a ritual and sacrament that fulfills the calling of John the Baptizer, while Jesus takes that first step into his ministry.

John is an interesting character – he chooses a life away from the temple power, off the grid, eating bugs and wearing animal skins. He offers an alternative to temple practices, held tight by the priests and moneychangers. He invites people to come as they are to prepare for a new life and a new reality. As he welcomes and baptizes those in need of real hope, he also is preparing himself for the day Jesus will come asking for baptism. We hear Mark's version this year, and Mark being so brief in his telling, leaves out practically all detail from the encounter, but I'm still interested in the intersection of John the Baptizer and Jesus, and how in baptism each are honoured in their role – of course the people

watching don't know yet who Jesus is, so for them the scene is especially strange and mysterious. In this intersection God is revealed in full Trinitarian form: the Christ in Jesus, the Holy Spirit coming down – how does one describe what the Holy Spirit looks like? Like a dove! Another one of the gospels suggests maybe lightening! And then God the Father speaks from heaven: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

We often think of Baptism coming from the Jewish tradition of a cleansing ritual bath, but the word also comes from shipwreck or drowning from shipwreck. And this is particularly remarkable because during Jesus' ministry he spends a lot of time with fishermen. To them, drowning at sea, was an all too present reality and would not have been used lightly. We, too are a people whose lives are tied to the water. Boats don't often go down in our waters, but it's pretty likely that if one did go down, we would know someone on it. This is very clever on Jesus' part to use a word that they presumably already know to convey to them the weight of what it means to follow God. Die to the life you know – go out in the middle of the Sea of Galilee and drown in a boat wreck – and rise anew as a faithful servant of God. It would have caught their attention, hearing the message with familiar words. The baptism is the submerging, the dying; the rising is the grace of God bringing us into a new life, named as our true self. Baptism is a gateway into discipleship. Being named beloved by God in baptism, we are no more beloved than we were before. Baptism is a ritual sacrament in which we make manifest, make physical what was already true spiritually. It's a moment for the physical and the spiritual to meet, and together say yes. It's a moment for the physical and spiritual to name the same truth and walk forward aligned. And in the spirit of Epiphany, we go forth from our baptism to manifest what beloved looks like in us.

In mainline churches we seldom use enough water in which we could drown. Baptism is nice and neat with a little bit of water, but

historically and theologically, it's about abundance, and abundance is messy and carefree. I had a confirmation student ask once where the water comes from in the font. She was quite disappointed to find out it comes from the faucet, but what she needed to learn is that all water is connected, all water is holy, like the water in the Jordan. It is the essence of water that is important. And all the better if we allow it to be at least a little messy.

When I look at this passage as a minister I always resonate with John the Baptizer because he prepared himself and prepared others for Jesus to come. And in this moment he has to find it within himself to rise to the occasion even if he doesn't think he's worthy to tie Jesus' sandals. I think if we look back on our lives, we can recognize defining moments, perhaps rituals of sorts that revealed who we really are. Here is one of mine: before I decided to go to seminary, I met Tim, a Medicine Man from northern Manitoba at a workshop here at the Haven. For Tim and his community, the universe is made up of light and dark energy, not in a dualistic way, one against the other, but rather in relationship together. The physical world, where humans live, resides between the dark and light, and we ebb and flow in the midst of their relationship. Light and dark are ideally always in balance and for Tim, in his theology, people get sick or injustice happens in the world when these energies come out of balance. To bring things back to equilibrium, one performs ceremonies of various kinds to create either light or dark energy, whichever one is lacking.

Something happened in Tim's community back home while we were attending our workshop and he had a need to do a ceremony to create light energy; he asked me to help. I was raised United Church of Christ (very similar to United Church) and I, especially at that time, knew very little about First Nations theology, spirituality and practices, and yet with fear and uncertainty I felt called by God to help him. Tim had been approached by a land owner who wanted Tim to visit his property, so we

went there and found the right tree for the ceremony. Tim began unpacking all sorts of objects from his bag that I didn't recognize. He said prayers and sang in Cree, a language I had never heard before. I didn't think I was unsafe, but I did feel a little scared of the unknown rituals that were happening before me; and I was scared of what my role would be: what was God going to ask me to do? After a few minutes he turned and handed me the bottle of water we had brought with us. "You need to speak for the water and pour it over the rock", he said, gesturing to a rock that would scarcely fit into his palm.

I looked at him blankly, thinking 'what do you mean, speak for the water? I don't have any context for that statement.' I don't know how to do that. Somehow, I believed that God wasn't asking me to be in any way inauthentic and wasn't asking me to be anyone I am not. On the contrary, God was inviting me and giving me an opportunity to step more fully into who I am, however mysterious that person was to me. So I took the bottle (again, not enough to drown in), closed my eyes and thought of water. I thought of its nourishment, its power in large quantities and the way it feels between my fingers when I am really paying attention to it, I thought of play and quenching thirst. I stood there for a few moments in all those thoughts, as well as my emotional and physical responses, and just experienced them all. When I was complete I opened my eyes and looked down at the bottle of water Tim had purchased at the gas station, broke the seal as I removed the cap, and poured water over the rock.

I don't think we often think about where the path is going to take us when we come to baptism or confirm our baptism, but in coming to the sacrament and saying yes, we put ourselves on a path with the living God, becoming more and more into who God created us to be. And in doing so we find ourselves in unexpected places, working toward surprising things. I do think Jesus knew what he was doing when he came for baptism. He didn't go to the temple for this defining moment.

True to his character, he gathered with people who are simply trying to get by, who need real hope and a miracle, and he let them witness this remarkable moment. But of course, as James sang a few minutes ago, they didn't yet know who he was.

I have heard many of you express the work it took over the last few years to bring this church together, the work you've done on the past and how eager you are to look at the future. Jesus' baptism is a wonderful time to stop and remember how extraordinary we all are in God's sight and to celebrate that. We are the baptized, we are disciples, and we are blessed, beloved of God. So this morning we are going to remember who we are and whose we are, and in that remembering, perhaps we will find renewed courage to bring that truth into service in the name of Jesus and in our daily lives. We aren't going to renew baptismal vows today, rather remember who we are and whose we are. This is just about you and God, and the water. You are a beloved child of God and you are blessed!