

**The Baptism of Our Lord**  
**January 10, 2021**  
**Mark 1:4-11**

*“Baptizing the Beloved”*

Today is about new beginnings as we celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord. That seems especially appropriate after the unbelievable and shameful events that took place within our national Capitol last Wednesday. The attempted coup at the very center of our democracy should shock all of us to our core. More than just shocking us, it should cause us to examine our own hearts, repent, and strive for a new beginning. What took place on Wednesday is a call to action for every citizen of this country to do an about-face, seeking a way ahead for our deeply divided country. The mayhem and violence, the needless loss of life, the root causes behind it – all of these are now part of our national legacy that we must live with. What have we learned from this? As we have seen, the words we use have power – tremendous power – both to bless and to curse. Our words have consequences, and we have seen all too graphically what those consequences look like in real time this past week from the highest office in the land down to each and every one of us. We are reaping what we have sown in our national life with political expediency; incendiary and manipulative fearmongering; the delusion of racial superiority manifesting itself as white nationalism; unresolved racial inequity and injustice for people of color; blaming and finger-pointing while refusing to accept personal responsibility; demonizing those who differ from us; enabling behavior that “goes along to get along”; relying on intimidation, threats and violence to get what we want. There is enormous work before us to bind up what is broken and shattered in our life together; to restore trust on every level of our society; and to look with hope to the future rather than be chained to the sins of the past. The Gospel for Christmas Day remind us: **“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it”** (John 1:5). Today is about new beginnings, for our nation and for us as people of Christ. This first Sunday after Epiphany is celebrated each year as the Baptism of Our Lord. It’s good for us to remember what took place there at the River Jordan so very long ago as Jesus was baptized by John. It’s even better for us to remember why this took place there at the River Jordan as **“the heavens [were] being torn open and the Spirit descended on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased’”** (Mark 1:10b-11). **Just as when we bring our own children, our beloved sons and daughters, to the cleansing waters of holy Baptism, we are well pleased, so today it is the heavenly Father who declares that He is well pleased at the baptism of his beloved Son.** The message on this Baptism of Our Lord Sunday, based on Mark’s account of this in today’s Gospel lesson, is entitled “Baptizing the Beloved.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

In today’s Gospel lesson we see John the Baptist once again, whom we saw back in Advent. Clothed in camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, he baptized the people of his day in the River Jordan. That One about whom John spoke is now before him: **“After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit”** (Mark 1:7-8). Jesus goes to John to be baptized by him, and it is then that all Three Persons of the Holy Trinity are revealed: the Father’s voice from heaven who said of Jesus, **“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased”** (Mark 1:11b). And with Father and Son is also **“the Spirit descending on him like a dove”** (Mark 1:10b). This is the triune God whom we worship and serve, present at the baptism of Jesus, and present also when we are baptized, as Jesus himself has called us to do, **“in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”** (see Matthew 28:19).

When God’s chosen people, Israel of old, came into the Promised Land (Joshua 3:1-17), they entered at the very place where John was baptizing at the River Jordan. In Jesus, God was doing a new thing with Jesus himself becoming the new Israel. Israel of old failed to keep God’s covenant, and so God sent his own Son to start over again; to hit the reset button, so to speak. Jesus, the new Israel, would be fully obedient to his Father’s will, keeping perfectly all of God’s commandments. Jesus, the new Israel, would call twelve apostles who would become the new twelve tribes of Israel. And it all begins in the waters of the Jordan River. Jesus was not baptized

for the forgiveness of sins, as we are today. Rather, Jesus' baptism marked him as God's chosen and beloved Son who would fulfill all righteousness, offering his righteous and sinless life in our place on the cross.

The water which we use for Baptism here in this font does not come from some supersecret location. It comes from the faucet at the sink in the sacristy. The power to forgive sin and cleanse iniquity doesn't come from the water itself, but from the Word of God. In his Small Catechism, Martin Luther explains this in easy-to-understand language: "What is Baptism? Baptism is not just plain water, but it is the water included in God's command and combined with God's Word." Luther goes on: "How can water do such great things? Certainly not just water, but the word of God in and with the water does these things, along with the faith which trusts this word of God in the water. For without God's word the water is plain water and no Baptism. But with the word of God it is a Baptism, that is, a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit, as St. Paul says in Titus, 'He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on our generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy saying'" (Titus 3:5-8). It is through God's gift of grace in holy Baptism that we become his beloved children.

Today's Old Testament lesson is the very opening words of Scripture from Genesis 1: "**In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth**" (Genesis 1:1). God made a beginning for the world then, and in Christ Jesus, whose birth we celebrated at Christmas, whose Epiphany we celebrated just this past week, and whose baptism by John in the River Jordan we celebrate today, God has made a new beginning for us all. Today's Scripture memory verse is about new beginnings: "**We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life**" (Romans 6:4). For the child of God, each and every day is a new beginning because of God has done for us in our Baptism. Each and every day, we are called to die to sin and rise to new life in Jesus. It is about starting over again each and every day, praying "**Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven**" (Matthew 6:10). Today is about new beginnings. In the midst of what we witnessed this past week, what is the way ahead? How will we move beyond the great divisions that are so painfully evident in the life of our nation? The Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman (1899-1981) was a twentieth-century author, philosopher, theologian, educator, and civil rights leader. He helped to give leadership to the social justice movements of the last century, and served as a mentor to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Among his many writings is this poem, which I believe is very appropriate for this present moment:

*When the song of the angels is stilled  
When the star in the sky is gone  
When the kings and princes are home  
When the shepherds are again tending their sheep  
When the manger is darkened and still  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost  
To heal the broken  
To feed the hungry  
To rebuild the nations  
To bring peace among people  
To befriend the lonely  
To release the prisoner  
To make music in the heart.*

(<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/when-the-song-of-the-angels-is-stilled/>)

Baptized as God's beloved children in the cleansing waters of holy Baptism, united with Christ Jesus in his death and resurrection, we are called to new beginnings: to find the lost, heal the broken, feed the hungry, rebuild the nations, bring peace among people, befriend the lonely, release the prisoner, and make music in the heart. May God help us to do this, for Jesus' sake. Amen.