

## **“A Wet New Year”**

**Bethlehem UCC**

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### **Mark 1:4-11**

Today marks the convergence of several important events in the calendar. Christmas has ended, a new year has begun, and Bethlehem’s “interim interim” is underway!

The traditional 12 days of Christmas conclude with the celebration of Epiphany on January 6. It is not observed much in this country, but it’s an important part of our story as believers. Epiphany is about the magi and the star and the message of Christ going from Bethlehem into all the world. The celebration of New Year’s is still on our minds when it comes to the calendar. If you wonder about that, just check out the lines of people at the weight loss and fitness businesses! Many of us like the new beginning that a new year offers every January.

And this new year marks a particular beginning for you at Bethlehem Church as you anticipate the arrival of your new pastor in just a few weeks and the beginning of a new era in your life and ministry as a congregation.

The calendar offers us one more observance today which in a way ties together some of these themes and milestones. Christian Churches the world over today observe Baptism of the Lord and read Mark’s version of the story of the baptism of Jesus as we did. Since baptism is the beginning of the Christian life for each of us, it is fitting that it comes at the beginning of the new year and at the beginning of this new era for Bethlehem Church.

As we unpack this story today, I wonder if you might look to this new year and your new pastorate by re-considering your baptism and by re-committing to what it means to be baptized, asking yourselves and one another how you are living out your baptism today.

For Mark’s Gospel, the story of Jesus begins in the waters of baptism. Mark doesn’t have a Christmas story at all. We make a much bigger deal of birth and birthdays than we do of baptism, but the point is there: life begins when we’re born, but new life, life in Christ, the life of faith, begin in baptism. Few of us celebrate the anniversary of our own baptism every year – many of us may not even know what that baptism date is. But we can all remember our own baptism each January as we hear again the story of Jesus.

Jesus’ baptism story, of course, begins with John the Baptist. Baptism itself is not new, but in John’s way he is calling people to repent and change their ways. He’s baptizing out in the wilderness, not in the temple or the city center. We hear that lengthy description of how odd and outside the norm is John the Baptist. Jesus joins this outsider movement focused on turning away from business as usual and toward readiness for God. And then the baptism of Jesus takes it farther.

Jesus’ baptism signals a new beginning, a change even from John’s baptism. The text says the heavens are torn open – ripped apart – as Jesus is baptized and identified as God’s own beloved. Things that are torn and ripped are never put back together in quite the same way. This is a fundamental change. God is on the loose, in the world, in our midst, and in baptism we are joined to what God is about. This violent language of heavens ripped and torn apart signals that this baptism movement, this Jesus way, this faith journey will not be a nice, quiet settled one. A God who tears open the heavens will not be tame and domesticated but will shake things up. In C.S. Lewis’ story, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, when the little girl Lucy first hears about the lion Aslan, Lewis’ Christ figure, she asks, “Is he good?” “Oh, yes, he’s good,” comes the reply, “but he’s not tame.” There is no soft organ music playing

at Jesus' baptism. Something major is happening. In fact, no sooner have the nice baptismal words been spoken – “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased,” than the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness, temptation and wild beasts.

Now, Mark's gospel is in a big hurry – it's short, compact, and it uses the word “immediately” more than 40 times. For most of us, the life of faith is not so rushed. But the point is the same. Being joined to Christ in baptism calls us to follow God into wilderness places, temptation places, places of wild beasts, so to speak. Basically, to places we might not otherwise go.

In 1960, Christmas Day fell on a Sunday, as it did this year. The reason I know that is because I was one of 6 or 8 babies presented for baptism that day at Pilgrim United Church of Christ in Greeley, Colorado, my grandparents' church. I found the bulletin in a box of stuff my mom gave me when they moved from the house I grew up in. Something began that day, something of which I wasn't really aware since I was 4 months old. Like generations before and since, my parents, together with the other parents that day, took a step they may have understood only partially, and that was to confess that their children belong to God and that what they want for their children is the way of God, a journey begun and guided by baptism above all else, a life lived according to God's purposes and not just our own.

On that Christmas Day in 1960, my parents surely could not have imagined that churches would even have female clergy, let alone that their baby daughter would grow up to be one. My parents were smart enough not to have hard and fast plans for their children but more than a few parents have been so rigid in their plans for their children that they could not allow for the path baptism into the Christian faith might take.

Rev. William Willimon, the former chaplain at Duke University tells one remarkable such story. It was the spring of the year and he received a call from an angry father. “I hold you responsible,” the man thundered, “that my daughter is throwing her life away.” Willimon says that he wasn't entirely sure who the young woman was. He certainly didn't know her well. As he struggled to put together a name and a face, he decided she was someone he saw as a regular attender at the Duke Chapel and that she had served as an usher. Evidently she had communicated to her parents that her experience in worship while a student at Duke had contributed significantly to her decision to go to the Third World to try to make a difference in a needy community. “She was supposed to be a cardiologist,” the father continued, “third generation. And now she's throwing it all away. And I hold you responsible.”

Willimon says he didn't really know how to respond to this man, but he finally asked a question. “Did you present your daughter for baptism?” Yes, of course we did. “Well, then, I guess you bear some responsibility for this as well.”

This is not to say that only those serving in the Third World are following God's call in baptism, or that cardiologists can't live significant lives of faith. But it is to say that when we take seriously that we are baptized by the God we meet in Jesus, we really don't know how it will turn out.

A friend of mine tells the story of joining a campus ministry spring break volunteer effort. Rather than heading out to Cozumel or Ft. Lauderdale, these students elected to stay on campus during spring break and to volunteer daily in the inner city of their community. Each morning before they went out to their assignments in soup kitchens and shelters and run-down buildings, they gathered around the baptismal font in the chapel for a short time of prayer and commissioning. And before they went out to their work, they each touched their hands to the water and then to their foreheads to remember that their baptism as the beginning point, the touchpoint, the grounding of their work for the day. I wonder how we might be changed in our daily work if we began each day with such a reminder.

Where will remembering your baptism take you? And your congregation? It may not be in Africa or the inner city, but maybe it will be. Jesus' baptism led him to take on the establishment at every turn – established ideas about what it meant to be faithful and established ideas about the ill and the poor and the stranger, about peace and justice and righteousness. Maybe our baptism will not call us to confront the religious and political order like Jesus did, but maybe it will be. Surely our baptism

calls us to allow for the possibility that a neat tidy status quo existence may not be what God has in mind for us as individual believers and as Christian communities and congregations.

So I invite you in this new year and this new era to remember your baptism and reflect on what that means for you individually and personally and for you together as a congregation. Whether you know a lot or a little or nothing at all about your own baptism day, take a few minutes to remember and give thanks that you are baptized. Consider your journey of baptism so far. Where has it taken you as a believer? Where has it taken you as a congregation of baptized people? And then recommit to it – recommit to being part of the God who tears open the heavens and breaks into our world. Recommit to being part of the one who came to bring good news to the poor and to bind up the brokenhearted. Recommit to this movement of standing up for what is right in God’s eyes, no matter the cost.

And do it knowing that being baptized isn’t just a commission and a task, but it’s also a promise and a blessing that no matter what, in life and in death, on good days and bad days, in joy and in fear, in security and in danger, you and I are held in God’s ever-lasting arms, claimed by God’s love and mercy and surrounded by the grace of Christ Jesus. So I wish you a “wet” new year at Bethlehem Church, and I offer you these words from the 20<sup>th</sup> century mystic and theologian Howard Thurman:

*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 back with their flock  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost  
To heal the broken  
To feed the hungry  
To release the prisoner  
To rebuild the nations  
To bring peace among brothers and sisters  
To make music in the heart.  
Amen.*