

I took an enormous leap of faith last week and purchased a 2021 Planner.

I purchased a planner last year, too, but abandoned it at the end of March. By then, what we thought would be a small interruption caused by the Coronavirus had thoroughly upended Spring, Summer, and Fall. “Normal” church and school activities were either cancelled or moved entirely online. The planner quickly became a paperweight, then a coffee coaster, and then, finally, moved to the recycle bin.

But I bought a new planner anyway and have been slowly penciling in dates of upcoming church committee meetings, religious holidays, doctor’s appointments, and family birthdays. The clean, crisp, pages of each month shimmer with hope and promise. With vaccines slowly being administered to the public, maybe this year will be better than the last.

The time after the Epiphany can feel like a “fresh slate” in the church. It’s a new calendar year, and in our context, budgets are reset and new church officers take their place at the table. In terms of our scripture readings, it’s the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, too. Soon he will call disciples to leave their day jobs and follow him (is this the first Session?) but first--he asks to be baptized. The baptism of Jesus has earthly and cosmic implications: “the heavens are torn apart and all creation in that moment is altered.”<sup>1</sup> Somehow, I think we are going to need much more than a new paper planner!

That the Gospel of Mark begins with a baptism illustrates how essential the baptismal act is to Jesus’ ministry and to our own spiritual growth and nurture. So why do Christians baptize? Depending on your denomination and upbringing, you might respond: “as a sign of repentance.” “Commit one’s life to Christ.” “Dedicate a baby or small child to the church. Etc.” None of these answers is wrong, and yet no single response fully encapsulates the meaning of baptism. Presbyterians, for example, profess that “Baptism is the sign and seal of our incorporation into Jesus Christ.” That doesn’t mean we become Jesus, but we are grafted into his body, along with his followers. When we receive the sacrament of Baptism, we also receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This Spirit is both responsibility and privilege, offering us the same spirit of Jesus Christ, and calling us to share in his same Spirit of justice, righteousness, and truth.

Baptism is a sacrament we share in common with other Christians, even if the doctrinal nuance varies from tradition to tradition. Therefore, the baptized are called to renounce the powers of Satan that threaten the life and well-being of all people. I am writing this sermon the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/baptism-of-our-lord-2/49243>

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day after insurrectionists mobbed the United States Capitol. Like you, I'm still processing the images and news reports. Armed people stormed the capitol, brandishing weapons. Some waved the Christian flag. Their intent was to harm and to divide. And, as a fellow Christian, I wonder, "what Bible are they reading? What theology guides their principles? They may claim a Christian identity, but they were not living into one. And the True Church, the church of Jesus Christ denounces their acts of insurrection and terror.

Watching the news unfold of the terror in our nation's capital, I wondered if my hopes for a fresh start were naive. Did I waste \$15 on another doomed planner? The texts for this Sunday reassured me that God is always doing a new thing and that the Spirit is breathing new life into existence. Newness is not limited to a day on the calendar, but is a continual act of God. Even our own baptism continues to give us new life. Baptism is a singular act, but the waters always flow so that, as the old saying goes, we never step into the same river twice.

There is a heresy of white Supremacy that threatens our country. That heresy seeks to divide us and to elevate the ideals of white-ness over others. I know that many of you hearing this sermon denounce white supremacy, and I also know that conversations about what happened Wednesday are difficult to have, especially when our friends and neighbors may hold those heretical views. In other words, there are "nice white racists." Racism, authoritarianism, and facism have no place in the Kingdom of God. The Baptism of Christ "invites us to remember the network we hold in common: a people who believe that when the heavens open in the beginning of Mark, God is doing something new." Our charge as Christians is to fight the powers of division. Our baptism is the same, it is the same spirit, and the same water. It is the same God we worship and serve.

Our church constitution (the governing principles of the Presbyterian Church) affirms:

We believe that "Baptism is the bond of unity in Jesus Christ. When we are baptized, we are made one with Christ, with one another, and with the Church of every time and place. In Christ, barriers of race, status, and gender are overcome; we are called to seek reconciliation in the Church and world, in Jesus' name." [Directory for Worship, W-3.0402]

As a baptized community, reconciliation also means that we are called to testify in the midst of a sinful world (c.f. Theological Declaration of the Barmen). We testify with our words: calling out racism, denouncing violence. We testify with actions, too: joining with other Christians to see the well-being of the poor and marginalized. We testify with our beliefs: that Christ alone is the head of the church and that together we are the body of Christ. And we testify with our

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prayers. Karl Barth is known to have said: “To **clasp the hands in prayer** is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.”

It’s a new day, a new year, and a re-newed call to wade in the waters with Jesus. Amen.