

January 7, 2024
The Baptism of Our Lord, Year B
Mark 1:4-11
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Wondering

Like most people with children, for me, back to school feels a lot more like the new year than January 1. It's a time when new things start; new routines, new schools, new classes, new teachers, new sports teams. In the church Sunday School starts again and Confirmation and youth group. Life takes on a different rhythm.

But in spite of that, new year vibe around late August and early September, the date change that just occurred on January 1, tells us that something has changed. It's officially a new year, or at least a new date. I still haven't gotten into the habit of writing 2024 on things. In fact, when I saved this sermon, I saved it as the Baptism of Our Lord 2023. I'll have to fix that before I send it out to people.

It's early days yet, in this new year, but I have to say, so far, 0 out of 10, would not recommend. Things at church have prevented us from getting into the rhythm of this year, as we've moved from crisis to crisis.

As much as I wish that had had in-person worship today due to the underwhelming snowfall, you should be glad that we didn't as, right now, we have no heat in the building.

That's the kind of week that it's been, one thing after another with the boilers that we thought we got fixed on Friday, but that have caused me to make two more calls to our service company this weekend.

And then, of course, the snowpocalypse that wasn't, causing us to spend a lot of time rescheduling things and making the difficult decision about whether or not to have in person worship. Like I said, I'm not thrilled with the call that we made this morning, but we can only make decisions based on the best information

we have at the time. It's probably not even going to turn out to be good sledding snow.

I always imagine that the first week of January is going to be my catch-up week, my week to get things cleaned up after the holidays so that I can start the new year on a good footing. That has not been the way that this week has gone, so, of course, that means that that is not how this year has gone. So far, in my little corner of the world, 2024 is not off to a good start. Nothing major, nothing earth shattering, just one hassle after another. You know what that's like, I'm sure.

We don't know when John the Baptist showed up at the Jordan River. It probably wasn't at the beginning of a new year, but it's good to be with him today, with him now, on the banks of the river, at the beginning of this new year, hoping for something new, something different, some fresh start.

And look. Imagine that you can see it. We are joined on this riverbank by so many people, people from the countryside, people who labor in the fields, in the vineyards, shepherds who watch their flocks in the hills, homemakers, carpenters, those who work on the river. And there are city people here too. Religious people, soldiers, tax-collectors, all kinds of people who live and work in the city, walking the fine line between the political center that Jerusalem was, for Rome and Rome's puppet Jewish king and the religious center that Jerusalem was, with its Temple and its priests and its sacrifices.

Here are all those people with us at the riverbank. Like them we have come to see John the Baptist, with his strange clothing and his diet and to hear his call to repent and his promise of something new, something better something exciting, something that will shake things up, someone who will change the world. John the Baptist proclaims,

"The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (Mark 1:7)

Have you ever wondered about those crowds who came to hear John the Baptist preach? Who came from the city, from the hills, from the riverside, from the plains? Who left their work, who left their homes and their tasks, their unwritten to-do lists, who stepped outside of their daily routine, the rhythms and rituals of their lives, who gathered up their children who left their herds and their flocks, and walked to the riverside to hear John preach, to hear what this strange man had to say? And then they did more than that. Those people from so many walks of life, from the big city, from towns and villages, from hill and from plain.

This festival in the church year is called the Baptism of Our Lord, but if we look at the text, it's the baptism of a whole lot of other people too. Those people, young and old, rich and poor, literate and illiterate, city folks and country folks walked into the muddy Jordan river and let John the Baptist dunk them under the waters confessing their sins, and letting the water wash their sins away.

Do you ever wonder what they were looking for, why they went to the riverside? What were they hoping would come of this act of repentance, this promise of something new, something better, some new hope, some new life?

It wasn't a new year for them, but perhaps they were hoping that it would be a new start.

I think that we don't have to wonder too hard why those people, those crowds from all over the Judean and from Jerusalem, came to the river. Maybe it's the same reason that we are here. Why we show up week after week, and this week especially at the beginning of what it for us, at the very least a new date.

Maybe they, like us, were looking for something new, a sense of connection, with a God who, for them was accessed mostly through the blood of sacrifice. Maybe they, like us, were hoping to feel the power and promises of God flow, not in blood, but in water, powerful enough to wash them clean, powerful enough to help them to change what needed to be changed, in their lives, in their world, powerful enough to help them to keep believing when they went back to their

homes, to their fields, to the bustle and noise of the city, to their herds, to their families, to the daily grind of the tasks and work of their lives, that God was real, that God was with them.

I wonder if any of them, when they stood on the banks of the river, listening to John preach and waiting their turn to be baptized, or when they stepped into the muddy Jordan, noticed a young man, probably alone, around thirty years old, who also joined them in the water, whose body, whose head went under the water when it was his turn, just as theirs had.

The gospel of Mark doesn't tell us who could see, who could hear what happened next, how the heavens were torn apart, how the Spirit descended on him like a dove, how a voice from heaven announced, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:11)

All it says for sure is that he heard it, he saw it. Jesus heard it. Jesus saw it. He received in that moment the confirmation of his identity, his mission, his belovedness.

We don't even know for sure why he was there. Was he questioning, wondering, what his life meant, what he was supposed to do? Had he stored up the stories that his mother had told him, after treasuring them in her heart, about how angels announced his coming, and his birth, how his earthly father had dreamed dreams, how wise ones had come to visit him, how a king had tried to kill him, how extraordinary things had happened at the beginning of his seemingly ordinary life? Did he wonder what it all meant?

Or had he known, deep within himself all along, that there was something different about him? Some kind of deep connection with the God he called Abba, Daddy. Did he feel it when he prayed? Did he know it when he studied scripture, hearing the truth, hearing the love in the ancient stories of his people and of the God who created and called and admonished and redeemed.

The gospel of Mark tells us that “immediately” after his baptism, Jesus was swept away, into the wilderness for an encounter with temptation and the devil.

After they were baptized the crowds who had gathered at the Jordan went back to their homes, back to their regular lives, back to the ups and downs of work and home and family, back to taxes and political tensions and religious squabbles.

And I wonder what they thought when or if they remembered the day that they had spent at the river. Did it help them to know that they were not alone. Did it help them to feel that their religion wasn’t just empty rituals or a God who needed to be appeased?

And here we are, gathered at the riverbank, with the crowds and with Jesus. Not to be baptized, but to hear again, the story of how Jesus, the beloved one, the anointed one, the Messiah, the savior, the angel sung, star lighted baby of Bethlehem became the man, who stands with us, in our mess, who enters the muddy waters of our life for us, who is God with us, in everything, in our work and in our play, in our giving and in our receiving, in our need and in our plenty, and who reminds us that we are bound together, belonging to God and belonging to each other.

And when we walk away from this story, walk away from this river, into this new year, we don’t have to wonder if anything has changed. Because Jesus changes everything.

And we don’t have to wonder if God is with us, because we know that in the ups and downs of life, in the messes and successes of life, in the missteps and the moments when we get it right, when things are going well and when we just can’t seem to get our plans to work out the way we imagined, when we are broken by our own mistakes or by the mistakes of others, we can remember that man, Jesus, standing in the water with us, the beloved one, God’s son, given for us. Emmanuel, God with us. Walking with us in the city, in the wilderness, in the struggles, in the

triumphs, feeding us, loving us, challenging us, strengthening us, to know our own beloved-ness and to see and respond to the beloved-ness of others.

For sure, life is full of ups and downs, and this year will hold some good and some bad for all of us. But through it all, whether the waters of joy or the waters of chaos flow over us this year, we can remember these waters, this river and we can know that Jesus is with us. Thanks be to God. Amen.