

Westminster Sermon – “The Embrace of Water”

Scripture Readings – Genesis 1:1-5, Mark 1:4-11

Sunday, January 7, 2024

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is Genesis 1:1-5. The water in Genesis represents the surging chaos out of which God’s spirit brings order in the creation of the world. On this first Sunday after Epiphany, we remember the Baptism of the Lord. If baptism is understood as a new beginning, then our first reading is especially appropriate. Fred Craddock makes an interesting point when he says: *Theologically, baptism as new creation can be seen against the original creation. Just as the original act of God inaugurated the first creation so the baptism of Jesus inaugurated his ministry, and the baptism of individuals inaugurates their new creation.* Hear now the Word of God.

*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. Amen.*

Our second scripture reading is Mark 1:4-11. For Mark, Jesus’ baptism at the age of 30 is the beginning of Christ’s public ministry and the beginning of a new age—an age of inclusivity. Water continues to be a theme as we gather by the River Jordan with John, the Baptist and Christ, however the symbolism has changed, rather than representing chaos, water is linked to order, creativity, and a new beginning that comes with the gift of the spirit. Hear now God’s word.

*John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. John proclaimed, "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 this one will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as Christ was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Amen.*

title of the sermon: “The Embrace of Water”

*The text: And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to John, the Baptist, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan. Mark 1:5*

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, we thank you for your spirit sweeping over the face of the waters in the beginning, creating the heavens and the earth and for the waters of the Jordan River that embraced Jesus at his baptism. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

We begin the Season of Epiphany, the Season of Light, with the Baptism of the Lord Sunday. Today we commemorate the baptism of Jesus and the beginning of his public ministry at age 30. We also remember our own baptisms with joy and thanksgiving. We are grateful that Jesus met John at the banks of the Jordan and embraced the water of baptism symbolizing his willingness to be immersed into our humanity.

We rejoice in the promises made and kept on our behalf within this community of faith through the years as we ordain and install new church officers who continue the circle of faith, who respond to the call to serve, and who embrace their own baptism vows in so doing.

Today, we give thanks for the children we have promised to nurture as we commit to continue the strong and clear voice of our abolitionist founders and those who came before us at Westminster, calling for *justice to roll down like an ever-flowing stream*, in the work of Christmas. Let us recommit to advocate for the poor and oppressed, work together to dismantle structural racism, to eradicate poverty, and to welcome refugees.

We give thanks for the powerful symbol of water in our life; a symbol that reminds us not only of the chaos and danger of deep, overwhelming water which God separated at creation, but also of the cleansing, quenching, and refreshing streams along the desert paths we are sometimes called to journey.

Last week Peter, Paul and I spent time in the city of Chicago. As we walked down North Lake Shore Drive, we were taken in by the beauty of Lake Michigan and found ourselves cleaned and refreshed during an afternoon of mist and light rain which we had no choice but to embrace. We were able to spend time and take in a movie with the Panellis, dear friends who are like family. The Kieffers and Panellis spent time together each summer embracing the waters on the beach of South Haven, Michigan while Paul was growing up.

The movie we saw, "The Boys in the Boat," is based on the New York Times Bestseller book by Daniel James Brown about the University of Washington eight-oared rowing crew that represented the United States at the 1936 Summer Olympics narrowly beating Italy and Germany to win the gold medal. The story gives a glimpse into the lives of the crew members and their personal struggles growing up in poverty during the depths of the Depression.

In the movie, the brief interaction at the Olympic Opening Ceremony between one of the rowers and Jessie Owen is a poignant reminder of the racism this fine young athlete faced not only in Nazi Germany in 1936 but also in the segregated country he represented with grace, skill, and speed, earning four gold medals.

Another scene in the movie that took my breath away was the crowd paying homage to Hitler at these 1936 Olympic Games. Brown's book describes how Hitler and his fascist government erected extravagant buildings and successfully covered up the evidence of their harsh and inhumane treatment of the Jews and other minorities so as to win worldwide approval for the Games, duping the United States Olympic Committee, among others.

As we enter an election year on the third anniversary of the breach of our Capitol to subvert the certification of the 2020 vote during a time of heightened rhetoric regarding tyranny, hatred, and untruths in our current politics, this disturbing scene in the movie brought home how precious our democracy is and how important the work before us is to bend the arc toward justice.

However, what particularly stood out for me and why I wanted to reflect on “The Boys in the Boat” on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday is the art of the sport. Each of the eight gliding seats on the well-crafted smooth, shiny shell is as important as all the others and it takes a perfectly synchronized crew to achieve "swing" on the water, the elusive perfect harmony of powerful strokes. The men and women who compete are among the largest and most physically fit athletes in the world; yet, how they respond to the commands of the coxswain (coxin) and their willingness to embrace the water with synchronization, consistent pacing, perseverance, and the ability to sprint to the finish are essential. When this is accomplished with strength, rhythm, and grace, the eight rowers become one crew.

The art of the sport involves faith in the coxswain (who navigates and commands the boat), a willingness to take direction and abandon individualism (it’s not all about me), the ability to embrace the emotion and rhythm of fellow rowers (empathy), and the strength of perseverance and determination (character). Just as there is something incredibly beautiful about synchronized swimmers, there is something stunning about rowers gliding at high speeds across the river, embracing the water in perfect synchronized harmony and strength.

The art of rowing offers insight into what it means to belong to the Body of Christ. As the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 12:

*For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us...therefore, let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer. We are in this boat together.*

Today, we commemorate Jesus’ baptism, and we remember our own. Today, we celebrate the God who was willing to step into the muddy banks of the Jordan, to embrace the waters of baptism, and to enter into a ministry of healing and justice. Today, we are invited once again to embrace that same water, baptism, and call, with gratitude for the dewdrops of mercy we have received from our Creator, Savior, and Sustainer.

My friends and fellow crew, let us remember our baptisms and be thankful. Amen.

