

Worship-at-home

January 10, 2021

The feast of the baptism of the Lord



<http://breakopenword.blogspot.com/2010/01/first-sunday-after-epiphany-baptism-of.html>

Call to worship:

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.¹

Opening prayer:

O God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit;
who is from everlasting to everlasting,
creator and upholder of all things,
source of all life and light;
you call us to be your instruments of hope in a hurting world,
and so, we answer your call and bring you our prayer and praise.²

Oh God,
who has given us your holy word that we may learn your truth and know your will;
give light to our understanding,
that we may rightly perceive and know what you would have us to be and do;
and endue us with grace and power ever to follow you;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

¹ Isaiah 60:1, 2

² Adapted from worship resource for January 10, 2021 available at: <https://presbyterian.ca/worship>

Assurance:

Hear and believe the good news! Who is in a position to condemn?
Only Christ, and Christ died for us,
Christ rose for us,
Christ reigns in power for us,
Christ prays for us.
Believe the good news of the Gospel!
In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven and set free to make a new start.

Hymn: “Christ, when for us you were baptized”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ER78SzyiyrM>

(Naoko Okada Hill)

Identity, belief, and prepositions

The liturgical year focusses on two events in Jesus’ life: his birth and his resurrection. The intervening times are intended to help us contemplate and absorb the significance of these events. The season between Christmas and Lent is sometimes called the Epiphany season and more often the first Ordinary season.

It is during this season that the work of God’s people is to contemplate the implications of Jesus’ birth.

We’ll use the Gospel of Mark as our primary resource in this season. To this end you might want to read it on your own, or listen to it being read, over the next few weeks.

READ MARK 1:1-15.

Three times in what we just read the phrase “good news” appears. Some translations use the word ‘gospel.’

Even prior to the beginning of the Common Era, a style of writing was developed to tell the good news stories of new emperors and kings who promised peace and prosperity to those who would bow before them and pledge allegiance to the ways and means of their kingdom. Because the emperors often understood themselves as specially anointed by the gods (i.e. ‘christ’) they would often be designated by the epithet ‘son of god.’ The stories told of the emperors came to be known as ‘gospels’: the good news of Caesar, the saviour, the son of god and his kingdom.

This is the background against which Mark penned the opening line of his gospel account: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” From the first line, we know that this is going to be a story about two ways of going through life: the ways of the kingdoms of the Caesars, and the ways of the kingdom of God.

We’ve come across this already. The story of Jesus’ birth is firmly set in the context of competing kingdoms. The king of the Jews was born while Joseph was registering his name in the emperor’s census list; the magi bowed before Jesus while Herod fumed in his palace.

Living into the implications of Christmas involves a choice of allegiance. To which kingdom will we be loyal?

Although Mark didn’t go into as much detail as did Matthew and Luke, the ways of Caesar’s kingdoms are symbolized by Jesus’ time in the wilderness following his baptism. The kingdoms of Caesar/the kingdoms of Culture/the kingdoms of the Satan would have us believe that to be of any value we must be god in our own eyes and in the eyes of others. We cannot be loved and content unless we can do marvelous things; unless we possess wonderful things; unless we have the respect, admiration, and even worship of many people.

In contrast, the kingdom of God would have us believe that a young woman with little public status is worthy of facilitating redemption; that an aged and proud priest can teach the world to pray; that an innocent and helpless newborn is worthy of the angels’ praise; that labourer choosing to adopt a toddler into his family line could bring about the reconfiguration of the stars and the wonder of the nations; and that a solitary man in a crowd on a river bank is worthy of the divine Voice claiming him as His own Son – beloved and valued.

By his baptism, Jesus fully accepts the human experience and, in him, the heavenly Father affirms our belovedness. That is the identity which the Living God of creation ascribes to us. That is the forgiveness of sins that is the central policy of the kingdom of God.

That is the forgiveness of sins which John preached to the people:

“John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness,
proclaiming a baptism of repentance *for* the forgiveness of sins.”

I have long read this line as a conditional statement – that repentance is necessary to receive forgiveness. And, indeed, that is the way of our human-designed kingdoms.

Forgiveness is conditional: acknowledge your guilt, prove you've changed, and I might be willing to forgive you.

Yet, as revealed by a 3-letter preposition, God's ways are not our ways.

The Greek word Mark used in the fourth verse that is translated 'for' indicates the arrival at a destination or the fulfillment of purpose. The same Greek word was used by Matthew in his account of the magi: "In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came *to* Jerusalem."³ Jerusalem is the finished place. Likewise, the forgiveness of sins is the finished state.

With Jesus' birth God reclaimed his kingdom and renewed his way of ordering society around the central policy of forgiveness.

Such grace is hard to accept.

Grace confronts and deeply offends the values of our human-centric kingdoms. On the one hand, we often view ourselves so highly as to be above offering forgiveness to those who offend us. On the other hand, we often struggle to accept the reality that we are valued outside of the respect we command, the things we own or of what we accomplish.

Nevertheless, what we celebrated during the Christmas season was that God broke into our world with tears and after-birth; with blood and the songs of angels. And in that baby who would grow to be crucified for our sake, our Father in heaven gives the assurance that we too are beloved. Not perfect. Not without aspects that belong more properly to the Satan's kingdoms. Not without need for confession and repentance. But beloved. And forgiven. Full stop.

John proclaimed a baptism of repentance *for* the forgiveness of sins. His message was not: repent so that you can be forgiven; but rather, in and by Jesus you are forgiven. His message was of baptism *into* the pre-existing state of forgiveness.

And the crowds flocked to the river to be baptized into this good news and to change their priorities in response.

The gospel of Jesus is indeed the ancient story of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of a first-century rabbi and adopted son of a carpenter; yet, it is also the

³ Matthew 2:1.

realization that against the backdrop of Caesar and his empires in all ages the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near.

Instead of behaving, thinking, and speaking according to the embedded and unexamined beliefs of culture, turn towards the One who proclaims by the Child of Christmas: You are my beloved. You are forgiven.

To God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit belong all praise and glory now and forevermore.
Amen.

Prayers of thanksgiving and intercession:

God of Grace, you call us to pray with open and hopeful hearts.
Trusting in you, we join together in prayer for ourselves and our world.

We thank you for the work of your church
and for all we are able to do to bring your love, healing and justice into the world.
We pray for churches that are struggling,
for churches enmeshed in conflict,
for those that are tired and in need of renewal;
and for congregations that have found a new sense of purpose.
Give them all wisdom and strength.

We thank you for the healing we have known in our lives:
for the experience of being forgiven;
for reconciliation and mended relationships;
for comfort in times of grief;
for pain eased and recovery from illness.
As the pandemic still haunts lives and nations,
we pray for those struggling with COVID-19 and its lingering effects,
for those whose emotions are raw from fear or isolation,
and for those exhausted by caring for others and serving the public day by day.
Give each one the hope and courage they need to face this new year.

We pray for our brothers and sisters across the world
who are striving for unity in places of division;
for justice in the face of oppression;
for peace where violence has broken out;
and for daily bread in the midst of poverty and famine.
Give them hope and courage to face this new year.

Strengthen us to serve you with our thoughts, our words, and our actions.
Help us to see others with your eyes,
and reach out with your compassion.
Teach us to work together and show what it means to follow you.⁴

In the name of the Prince of Peace,
Jesus our Saviour,
Amen.

Hymn: #177 “Christ, whose glory fills the skies”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u3hCQIUKXI0>
(Waltham St. Laurence Virtual Voices)

Benediction:
The Lord bless you and keep you,
the Lord be kind and gracious to you,
the Lord look upon you with favour
and grant you peace.
Amen.

⁴ From worship resource for January 10, 2021 available at: <https://presbyterian.ca/worship>