

“Claimed in Public” | Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:4-11
Rev. Michele Ward | Democracy & Faith Sermon Series
Baptism of the Lord Sunday | January 10, 2021
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church | Baltimore, MD

Introduction: Back in December, Andrew and I began discussing a three-week sermon series on democracy and faith. We were both thinking about how to spiritually prepare and respond as Christians in the weeks leading up to and following the presidential inauguration. I am shocked, but not surprised, that as we start this journey together our country is reeling from the storming of the U.S. Capitol Building. Some of us gathered to sing and to pray on Thursday night, setting aside time and space to come before God. Some of us spoke on the phone. And some of us needed to be alone and seek God. So whatever state of mind you find yourself in this morning, God has room for you in this text and in this community. God’s story is big enough for all of us, no matter what we feel or what we need. So, in light of all that we are holding, please join me in prayer as we seek a word from God.

Prayer: Prophetic God, you remind us over and over again that we belong first to you. Not to institutions, traditions, or power structures--but to you, to the earth, and to one another. Forces of evil try to normalize betrayal and block justice, but we know that you did not create us to act destructively. By the power of your grace, teach us how to let go of what keeps us from living the claims of our baptism. Teach us how to be a community loyal to you, loyal to love, and loyal to justice. Amen.

Sermon: The lectionary meets us this morning with a transfer of power. The baptism of Jesus and the public declaration of his ministry pairs with the transition of John the Baptist from the public. John the Baptist paves the way for Jesus, prophesying and calling people to repentance and new life in the wilderness. During his ministry, he attracted disciples of his own from the hill country of Judea and from the religious center, Jerusalem. He is fully aware that he is not the Messiah, stating that he is unworthy to untie the sandals of Jesus. John has no illusions about his role in the larger story of God’s redemption of creation, and knows what he must do. He does not try to hold on to power. John seems to be a man with a healthy ego, unaffected by the gifts and calling he sees in Jesus. He understands his limits and does not question them. He is clear about his task and knows when to walk away.

But before he does, God has another important task for him. He must baptize Jesus himself. Mark’s Gospel is the only one that explicitly states John baptizes Jesus, and John makes no statements of squeamishness about it,

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unlike in Matthew’s Gospel. Luke makes no mention of who baptizes Jesus, and John’s Gospel does not mention it at all. The John of Mark’s Gospel has no hesitation. He clearly understands his role and he does not hesitate to act when God calls upon him.

Mark sets John up to be one in a long line of prophets. He bears a close resemblance to Elijah. Some even claimed that John was a reincarnation of Elijah, the same Elijah that resurrected the dead, performed miracles, and spoke words of truth to power. In the same way, Mark is setting Jesus up to be like the prophet Elisha, the successor of Elijah, who asks for a double portion of God’s Spirit before Elijah is swept up into heaven in a chariot. And where does this event take place? The Jordan River, which Elijah parts, the same Jordan River where John baptizes now. This is imagery that we often miss in this account, but the audience reading or hearing this Gospel would have understood the parallels. They would have also understood the radical nature of John’s ministry on the fringes of society, disconnected from the religious orders of the day, such as the Pharisees and Sadducees, and what it would mean for Jesus to inherit and expand the ministry that John so faithfully built.

Mark positioned John and Jesus in this specific way because he knew that John needed to bless the ministry of Jesus by baptizing him. Mark’s account includes this detail in order to credential Jesus before his own followers and to make sure the leadership transition is clear. John is stepping away. His time is over. The ministry of Jesus will begin--the Messiah is here.

Our country greets us this morning with an upcoming transfer of power. The President Elect is meant to be preparing his team for the leadership transition in ten days; instead, the White House is full of Twitter bans and resignations. We do not see mutual respect or admiration between Trump and Biden the way we see it between John and Jesus. We do not hear echoes of John’s humility in the outgoing President; rather, he insisted that he won the election and voter fraud is rampant. Neither of these statements has proven true, and yet he continues to repeat them over and over again.

Rather than accept defeat with grace, the current leadership instigates violence and espouses conspiracy theories. Rather than accept the natural progression of democracy, our current president peddles lies to the American people as if they are truths. Hate groups, conspiracy theorists, and white supremacists use

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Trump to fuel their rage, and he uses them to fuel his narcissism. The vicious cycle continues unabated, escalating.

Leaders around the world, including President Macron of France and Chancellor Merkel of Germany, expressed their concern and anger about the fraying of democracy in the United States. At home and abroad, the storming of the U.S. Capitol Building signifies the political crisis our nation is currently facing. This week Roger Cohen of *The New York Times* wrote, “If it could happen at democracy’s heart, it could happen anywhere.”¹ For many democratic nations, the chaos in the United States points to what could be possible for them as well.

God does not abandon us in the chaos. Instead, God claims us as Beloved, baptizing us into the prophetic tradition of John and Jesus. God claims John and shaped him for prophetic ministry. This shaping gave him the humility to know that the ministry to which he’d been called did not belong to him. He knew he was preparing the way for the Messiah and that he was not the Messiah himself. Each of us will have different roles in the world based on the way God created us and what God calls us to do with how we’re created. None of this is bad or means that some of our roles matter less than others. Our diversity of gifts and calls are a reason to celebrate God’s grace.

John the Baptist made the uncomfortable choice. He preached a gospel of repentance and forgiveness in the wilderness, baptizing people and offering them God’s grace. He lived outside of the comfort of being a temple priest or community rabbi, and lived a radical life. He stood up to corrupt leaders like Herod Antipas. He did not concern himself with social or political expectations. His resolute faithfulness led him to the point in his ministry where he could publicly declare that Jesus was the Messiah and he had done his part.

God claims Jesus publicly, too, telling all present at his baptism that he was God’s child and was beloved. Jesus humbled himself to the spiritual authority of John, allowing his cousin to baptize him and essentially ordain him for public ministry. Jesus could have continued on his way without this moment of the transfer of power. He is God’s child, after all, and God incarnate. This moment of humility matters even more because of these realities. Jesus knew

¹ Roger Cohen, “A Shattering Blow to America’s Troubled Democratic Image,” January 7, 2021, <https://nyti.ms/3opm4nR>

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that he could not do what needed to be done, do what God had called him to do, without this key public declaration and owning his power before others. He needed it as much as they needed it.

Jesus made the humble choice. He made the strategic choice. He knew that John’s following was faithful and would take John’s lead. For John to say what he did about Jesus, choose to baptize him, and step out of the way, signaled to his disciples that Jesus was the Messiah. They could have confidence in following Jesus because of John’s endorsement. Jesus knew this and chose this public beginning to his ministry in order to credential himself in front of others and gain the following he would need in order to launch a prophetic ministry in Judea.

When we are baptized, we join Jesus in the prophetic tradition. His mission required everything of him. Jesus was so radical and faithful to his mission that he was executed by the state, and so was John. We must ask ourselves what we are willing to risk in order to see justice done in our city, our country, our world.

God is asking us to repent and to receive the truth of our belovedness, and then act on that truth for the good for the world. God is asking us to repent of the ways we have been complicit in Trump’s rise to power and to examine our approach spiritually and politically. God is asking us to look at our choices, both small and large, and recognize how we choose white supremacy in our daily actions.

All the choices we make--the neighborhoods we live in, the routes we drive in Baltimore City, the places we shop, the schools where we send our children or recommend to our friends--they all add up eventually to perpetuating the same white supremacist systems and beliefs that we ardently reject when we see it in the most extreme forms like we did on January 6. But white supremacy can be subtle, too. It does not always come looking like neo-Nazi gear or a Kekistan flag. It can look like living in the County and working in the City. It can look like ignoring the boys washing windows on North Avenue. It can look like having a grocery store in your neighborhood and a low vacancy rate.

The good news is that God has already claimed us in public. God has already declared us beloved. We do not need to worry about what others may think

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about us. We do not need to worry about trying to keep up with the social pressures to behave a certain way, attend a certain school, or live in a certain neighborhood. If we truly believe that we are beloved and forgiven by God, we live rooted in love. This rootedness spurs us to confident action in the world because we can trust that God’s opinion of us matters more than the social or political opinions of others.

Do we act with self righteousness or do we act with humility? Do we seek the uncomfortable choice or the socially expected choice? Faithful action in the world requires us to repent and to seek forgiveness. And then it requires us to act differently. Not simply to say the right words or signal to others that we understand what it means to be a Christian, but that we understand what it means to go another way. God’s grace is ready to meet us there, whenever we are ready to turn around. Faithful action looks like the commitment of John, and it looks like humbling ourselves like Jesus.

Faithful action will not seem like enough in the face of conspiracy theories and fear mongering. Following the prophetic tradition of John the Baptist and Jesus will not seem like enough. Our actions will probably feel small and inconsequential. But as Priest Tish Harrison Warren says, “we must reconstruct communities where we can know and speak truth, serve the needy and poor, love our neighbors, learn to be poor in spirit, rejoice in suffering, and witness to the light of Christ.”² Living prophetically does not require us to baptize in the wilderness. It does not require us to be baptized in the Jordan River. But it does require a hard look at ourselves. It will be frustrating and difficult, but we are not alone. God declares us beloved and forgiven as we go about the prophetic work of living out our faith on a daily basis. God has already claimed us in public. Will we do the same?

² Tish Harrison Warren, “We Worship with the Magi, Not MAGA,” January 7, 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/january-web-only/trump-capitol-mob-election-politics-magi-not-maga.html>