

January 10, 2021 Baptism of Jesus
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Genesis 1:1-5, Psalm 29
Acts 19:1-7, Mark 1:1-11

[Professor Matt Skinner in Sermon Brainwave podcast #763:

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcast-type/sermon-brainwave>

MPR Reference: <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2021/01/09/reporters-notebook-a-search-for-answers-in-dc-brings-confusion-and-confirmation>. The ULCH new capital campaign video called Opening Doors: <http://www.ulch.org/OpeningDoors>]

Grace to you, beloved of Christ Jesus, grace and peace. Amen.

“And they were baptized by John in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.”

Really, quite literally, they were baptized, telling the truth.

That’s what I’d title today’s sermon: Telling the truth.

There are weeks that feel so pivotal, we mark them with what happened before and what happened after.

This feels like just such a week in our country.

Wednesday feels like just such a day in our nation.

The audio clips with shouts, shuffling feet, whispered cries, breaking glass, the pop of gun fire.

The video footage of leaders of all persuasions hunkered down, uncertain what next, gas masks, banners flapping, feet on desks.

The still pictures of the Confederate flag unfurled.

Headlines like insurrection, attempted coup, treason, impeachment.

Dear friends, take a breath, a deep breath.... let it out.

In an already intense and hard time, this has been...a week: terrifying, maddening, destabilizing, revealing.

This week I’ve been reading and rereading the start of Mark’s gospel—we heard it already.

This gospel begins more like Genesis does, and certainly unlike the other gospels:

In Mark, there’s no sweet baby in the manger, like in Luke.

There are no wise sages, watching over their shoulders for what King Herod might do next, like in Matthew.

There is no “Word become flesh...or light shining in the darkness,” like in John.

No, not here, not in Mark.

Mark’s gospel begins with this straightforward: “The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ.”

Four verses in, an *adult* John the Baptist appears and people are streaming out from the city to this hinterland by the river confessing their sins, and being baptized.

This Jordan wilderness is far from Jerusalem’s temple, far from the institutional power,

at the borders, both literally and figuratively.

The people stream out of Jerusalem, hungry, curious, longing.

It's edgy—and intentional—to root such an integral story in the wilderness.

It's decentering when God is on the loose.

And, honestly, in the middle of a pandemic

when we're away from our church building,

when we're worshiping from home,

when the US capitol has been breached,

there is something radical, beautiful in noticing how powerfully God shows up in this edgy wilderness.

In the wilderness, by the river, they are confessing their sins.

This word that is translated Confessing, quite literally means "telling the truth out of ourselves."

It's all about telling the truth.

And that means telling the truth of what we've done and not done,

that which is great and that which is awful—sure,

but also, just as much, telling the truth of who we are and what we face,

telling the truth of what we value and believe, and how we try to embody these values, these beliefs.

We begin most of our services with confession.

The goal is not to stir up guilt or shame, but rather to tell the truth, and in telling our truth to find freedom.

Something changes, really, everything changes, in that moment of truth telling.

As Professor Matt Skinner says it,

"This is the people of God being straight about who they are, and [straight about]... what's real."

Or to put it in our own voice:

This is **us** being straight about who **we** are, and about what's real, what matters to us.

On Wednesday evening, after all the chaos, all the violence, when the senate reconvened

There were some speeches about what is real, what matters.

There was some telling the truth.

Dear ones, in our telling the truth, God claims us, redeems us

with those same words that echoed through the frayed heavens at Jesus' baptism:

You are my child, my beloved, with you I am well pleased.

Our “telling the truth out of ourselves” comes in many forms.

I was reflecting this morning on truth telling as Anna Bablitch Coppin and Paul Odenbach

spoke of their experience of medicine during this COVID pandemic...

How is our health care system working or not? Where are the resources?

What does their health care role demand?

How do they reflect on these demands as professionals, as human beings, as people of hope and faith?

Another instance of Telling the Truth:

One of my friends shared recently that the hardest, most pivotal confession she'd ever made was admitting to herself that she has clinical depression.

As she said it: God loves me and I'm not perfect nor do I need to be perfect.

Another person, a woman of color, after the late December police shooting

told the truth about how anxious and retraumatized she's feeling

for her own family and for her husband who is Black.

When her husband leaves the house, she wonders: Will he be hurt or worse?

Or will the police enter *their* home?

She's confessing her experience, her fears.

I heard a report on Friday by MPR's John Engen from Bemidji.

He had interviewed his neighbor, Michelle, who with her husband had gone to the rally in Washington.

She went, as Engen says, “to resolve the cognitive dissonance she's carried in her mind for the last four years.”

Her friends are divided, half leaning left, half staunch Trump supporters,

each side holding beliefs about the other.

Michelle wanted to experience the rally, feel it, for herself.

I valued this truth telling by both the reporter and this woman named Michelle.

It reminds me how messy and mucky, disillusioning and yet necessary, truth telling and confession can be.

In a time like this, that's important, too.

This morning we kick off of our new campaign called Opening Doors.

Later in the service we'll be viewing the campaign video, hearing the plans.

This campaign invites us to do our own truth telling about what this church, this community of faith,

means to us,
and how through this ministry we know again our identity, our calling, as Christ's beloved.

One of the things I miss the most about in person worship

is watching you of every age come around the baptismal font,
dip into the water, and mark yourself, or someone else's forehead.

I love when younger kids on tippy toes reach in and then reach up to mark their parents.

I love when friends and spouses, teenagers, pew-mates, strangers

dip in, look one another in the eye, and gently tell the truth—

Remember that you are baptized.

You are beloved of God.

It's tempting to order things, to say first we confess sin, we tell the truth,

then we hear again that we are beloved.

Sometimes, friends, the truth that most needs our telling, our claiming, is our identity as beloved ones.

This week with all we witnessed, nothing feels quite the same, and the risks and threats are real.

The power of baptism, the promises of God, can stand up to this chaos.

It can give us voice to tell the truth, to tell our truth, and to hear someone else's truth.

This morning as prepare to sing our hymn of the day, Borning Cry, Zach will give us a long introduction.

Find your bowl of water, imagine the waters washing over you.

Tell the truth to yourself and to God:

your sin and your misses,

your pain and longings, your identity,

your truth.

And hear again, in these same waters:

You are washed in God's loved, you are forgiven all your sin.

You are claimed as God's beloved, healers, lovers, truth tellers.

Now and always. Amen