

January 14, 2024 Baptism of Jesus Sunday (using texts from Baptism of Jesus and Epiphany 2)

Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Samuel 3:1-10,

Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18, Mark 1:4-11

[With clips from my own sermons in previous years, particularly 1-10-21. Professor Matt Skinner in Sermon Brainwave podcast #763: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcast-type/sermon-brainwave>.

These two blogs have been on my mind with the Embodied Anti Racism class: <https://wildbody.ca/blog/on-building-belonging-as-white-people-within-our-movements>, and <https://educationforracialequity.com/offerings/embodied-anti-racist-intensive-for-white-bodies/>]

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

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

Quite literally, they were baptized, **telling the truth.**

The gospel reading this morning, from Mark is nearly the start of his gospel.

No sweet baby in the manger, like in Luke.

No “In the beginning was the Word,” like in John.

No family tree to map out the lineage, or sages guided by a star, like in Matthew. None of that!

Just four verses into Mark, an *adult* (you heard me) *an adult* John the baptizer appears

and people are streaming out from the city to this hinterland by the river,
confessing their sins, and being baptized.

It’s in this place, that an *adult* Jesus comes in solidarity to also be baptized,

where the heavens are torn open, and the Spirit comes down,

and the voice of God affirms: “You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

This Jordan wilderness is far from Jerusalem’s temple,

far from the institutional power,

at the borders, both literally and figuratively.

It’s edgy—and intentional, I believe—to root such a key story—Jesus’ baptism!— in the wilderness.

Don’t you think this de-centers us a bit? To hear God is powerfully showing up in unexpected places?

We need this sometimes, and the people go to the wilderness hungry, curious, longing.

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.”

Telling the truth of what we’ve done and not done,

that which is great, that which we can scarcely whisper.

But also, telling the truth of who we are and what we face, the baggage we carry,
telling the truth of what we value and believe, and how we embody these values, these beliefs,
sometimes with success, sometimes not, often with a bit of each, when we're honest.

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

We begin many of our services with confession.

The goal is not to stir up guilt, but rather to tell the truth and experience Christ's forgiveness, freedom.

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.

Dear ones, in our telling the truth, God claims us, redeems us with those same words

that echoed through the torn heavens at Jesus' baptism:

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

What might this telling the truth look like? Let me share a few reflections.

This week, Pastor Maria and I and a dozen or so colleagues

began taking a class called *Embodied Anti Racism*.

For many white bodied people, like me, with European ancestors,

we've learned a lot in our heads about race and racism,

but we're not as in touch with our own bodies,

or the pain that our bodies cause some of you and your bodies,

some of you who are people of color.

All these years after Dr. King preached and marched,

the movement continues and we've got a lot to learn and to relearn,

and a lot of this is deep in our culture, and deep in our very bodies.

Telling the truth.

I've also been reflecting on the truth telling in the story of Samuel,

Samuel's courage to listen to the call, his persistence, his vulnerability.

He doesn't get it at first, not the second time either, but he keeps listening, keeps trying,

less worried about being right, more concerned to heed the call.

We can learn from this, my friends.

When our perfection gets the best of us, when we don't get it at first,
when we feel it should be all or nothing, take a breath, ease up, try again.

There is truth also in the Psalm, O Lord, you've searched me and known me.

What grace, to hear again that God already knows us, our whole selves.

This week we are kicking off our new Capital Appeal called Opening Doors 2.

Later in our service, Gretchen Peik will share more.

I'm excited about the appeal and the process.

One of our capital appeal co-chairs, Erik Strand, shared a story that has stuck with me.

It's about a church he knew that was doing a capital appeal, not so different than ours.

A member of that congregation was preparing for a big move,

following a job to a new state,

soon to leave this congregation of many years and seek out another church in the new community.

The capital appeal began, and this person (the one who'd be moving so soon) made a generous pledge.

The pastor noticed this, and pulled him aside, curious, did your plans change?

"No, no, they didn't change, I'm still moving," he explained.

"But I wanted to pledge here because I am hoping that the folks at my new church

are also supporting their congregation on behalf of those like me, *who are still to come.*"

There is truth in this, my friends, the truth of identity and trust and hope.

The truth of what it means to support a community's ministry not simply for our own sake,

but for the sake of the gospel for those who are still to come.

Finally, some of the most honest truth we tell is how God's love holds us in life and in death.

Very early on Thursday morning, long time Hope member, Arloene Stevens, died.

She turned 90 this past October.

As we do when members of this community die, I'll share a little about Arloene and then we'll pray.

Arloene grew up in Fertile, in northwest Minnesota, the youngest of six kids

in a strongly Norwegian American community.

Arloene's mom died when Arloene was 23 years old.

At that time, Arloene made a shift from teaching in a two room school house in North Dakota

to taking up accounting, landing in Minneapolis.

She married Jim Stevens here at Hope in 1962 and they settled in Northeast.

Over the years they welcomed 4 children, 11 grandkids, and 2 great-grandchildren.

Some of Arloene's family are with us this morning.

Nearly 20 years ago, Jim died.

Around Hope, Arloene was active in a women's circle and served at funeral receptions.

In retirement she joined the quilters and the Hope Diamonds senior group.

Arloene loved being around people and their home was a place of welcome for many.

She enjoyed camping, traveling, coffee with friends, and baking,

and loved her cat named Tori who was resting on Arloene as she died.

A Funeral Service for Arloene will be held here at Hope *this* Thursday.

When members of this congregation die,

we remember how the waters that first washed over them in baptism, hold them now in death.

We pray at the baptismal waters, linking ourselves to God's powerful waters of promise.

Holy God, holy and powerful, we remember before you today our sister Arloene Stevens. We thank you for giving her to us to know and to love as a companion in our pilgrimage on earth. At these waters of baptism, you welcomed her into your love. At these waters, you comforted her in times of trouble and encouraged her in delight. At these waters, you now enfold her into Jesus' death and resurrection and the promise of life everlasting. Console us who mourn and bring us together to feast with Arloene and all the saints at rest. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

In this time, dear ones,

I invite you, if you'd like, to come forward,

dip into the baptismal waters,

mark the cross on your own forehead, or the forehead of someone else who is consenting,

and tell the truth, saying something like: "Remember, You are a beloved child of God," Amen