



A New Beginning

Mark 1:4-11

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This past Thursday, January 6, was celebrated as the day of Epiphany. The Epiphany is the “manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles.” The Gentiles are represented at Epiphany in the scriptural text by the magi, whom we read about last Sunday. But, in general, we – you and I – those outside the people of Israel – we are the Gentiles. Epiphany is about God’s revelation of the good news to us who are outside the historical covenant of God and the people Israel.

Epiphany is the promise and proclamation that God’s love extends to us all, and that in Jesus Christ, we are able to witness God’s expansive and inclusive embrace of all humanity.

It is because of the Epiphany we read the Biblical text as a people of faith. It is the Epiphany that incorporates and invites us, a broad, diverse, and scattered humanity into a single community. The Epiphany is God’s way of saying, “look here, for here in Jesus Christ is the witness of my love, which invites you into *relationship* and *covenant*.”

Relationship and *covenant*. These two words carry with them varying implications.

When we talk about relationship, we often want to define the kind of relationship we’re speaking of. Are we talking about a business agreement – a relationship that is built upon financial transactions and mutual benefit? Are we talking about a friendship – a relationship that is built upon mutual affection that does *not* include a sexual component? Are we talking about a spouse or partner – a relationship that is built upon mutual affection that includes a sexual component? Are we talking about a family – a relationship that is based on genetic or ancestral commonalities? Are we talking about a neighbor – a relationship that is based on one’s geographic location?

The type of relationship we have will determine in large part what the relationship looks like.

And then there’s covenant. Again, there are different kinds of covenants. There are HOAs, which mandate housing covenants. There are marriages, which invite a covenant of exclusive and lasting spousal relationship. There are codes of ethics, which many universities require students to agree to through a signed covenant. Covenants are agreements usually entered into voluntarily, though sometimes they are required by businesses, organizations, or other hierarchical entities.

Like with relationships, the type of covenant will determine in large part what the covenant looks like.

As a people of Christian faith, relationship and covenant are a large part of our identity, and the two are inextricably linked. Throughout the Hebrew Scripture, for the men of Israel, the incorporation into

relationship as a Jew, and as a people of the covenant, came through circumcision. Being circumcised was a formal practice to be included in the covenant of God, and as such, it brought one into relationship with all of Israel.

In the Epiphany of Christ to the Gentiles, the covenant of God is seen to expand and to offer invitation to those who had previously been excluded. The invitation to this new covenant is initiated by John in our Gospel text this morning through the practice of baptism. It's a practice that we find is maintained even in the book of Acts and in Paul's letters as the early church lived through its formative years after the resurrection of Christ.

Mark's Gospel does not include a birth narrative for Jesus – there is no manger, no shepherds, no angels, no Joseph or Mary, no Magi ... there is no infancy for Jesus. Mark's Gospel picks up the story of Jesus as he is beginning his public ministry, around the age of 30.

John the Baptist was in the wilderness – some location not far from Jerusalem that was uninhabited. The text indicates he was at the River Jordan – west of Jerusalem, likely not too far north of the Dead Sea. There in the barrenness of land in-between modern day Jordan and the West Bank, John proclaimed and practiced the act of baptism, inviting repentance that people may have their sins forgiven.

Mark's Gospel tells us that people from the whole Judean countryside, and everyone in Jerusalem, was going out to John and he was baptizing them in the River Jordan and they were confessing their sin.

John is the precursor to Jesus. We learn in the other Gospels that he is thought to be the promised prophet who would proclaim the coming of the Messiah. Matthew's gospel declares John to be the one spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, who wrote, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

John proclaims that while he is baptizing with water, that Christ, who is to come, will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Baptism becomes the symbol and act of incorporation into God's new covenant. Baptism becomes the sign of a new relationship, not just with God through Christ, but into relationship as a people united by God through Christ.

While John was in the river baptizing, Jesus showed up. Jesus walked down into the river, and there John baptized him. As Jesus was coming back up out of the water, the heavens were torn open, and the Spirit of God descended upon him like a dove. And then, a voice cried out from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of his public witness and ministry. At the end of his public witness and ministry, Jesus offers the instruction to his disciples to continue the act of baptism, which will become a public sign of one's incorporation into the people of God.

As an act in which Jesus himself took part, and as a practice Jesus instructed us to continue to use to in the life of the church, Baptism is one of our two sacraments in the United Methodist Church. It is a public and visible witness of God's invisible grace, which claims us as a people of the covenant and calls us into relationship with God and with one another.

Just a few weeks ago, we celebrated a couple of baptisms on the day after Christmas. I want to remind you the words we share at baptism: "Through the Sacrament of Baptism, we are initiated into Christ's holy Church. We are incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the Spirit."

As the church, as those who are witnesses to the baptism, we are invited to respond to God's work in claiming the baptized individual as one of us by saying, "With God's help we will proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ. We will surround these persons with a community of love and forgiveness, that they may grow in their trust of God, and be found faithful in their service to others."

Anytime, and every time, we celebrate the sacrament of baptism, it is an invitation to us, the community of faith, to reflect on our own baptism. Every time we witness a baptism, we are invited to reclaim our own, and to respond to the God's work of incorporation with a promise of relationship to the newly baptized.

Perhaps that's hard – to remember our baptism – because for many of us, we don't remember our baptism. Perhaps, like me, you were baptized as an infant. You may have no mental recollection of that day. The only thing I know of my baptism comes from what my parents have told me, and the visual I have of a single picture from that day with my mom holding me, my dad standing just beside her, on the steps of the church following worship that morning.

Whether we were too young to remember, or because of all the days of our lives, the day of our baptism seems relatively insignificant, I don't think that we think about our baptism often enough. I don't think we fully understand or appreciate the impact and weight of baptism. I don't think we grasp just how powerful baptism is as an act of incorporation – of bringing us in to the covenant of God or in to relationship with God and with the great cloud of witnesses who have come before us, and who will come after us.

Perhaps because we don't remember ... or perhaps because we're just too superficially independent as a people ... either way, we don't fully understand the power of incorporation that comes with baptism. I think we have completely misunderstood the power of God in incorporating us into something greater than ourselves.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, spent much of his life trying to help people see just how powerful was God's incorporation of our lives into something greater than our individual identities. Wesley feared that we, as a people of faith, would lose sight of just how much God empowers us to be faithful – to live as witnesses of the resurrected Christ – to claim God's life-giving love for all of creation. And so, in 1775, Wesley introduced a covenant service into the early Methodist Societies as a

time of renewal – as a time to remember the claim on our lives made in our baptisms as a people of the covenant – as a people of faith.

The covenant service invites a time for self-examination, reflection, and dedication, remembering that we have been claimed by God, that we are in covenant with God, and that we are in relationship with one another.

The covenant service offers a time of repentance – like John the Baptist invited for all who came to be baptized. It is a normal, necessary, and a regular practice of the church to repent and to confess.

The covenant service offers an invitation for us to remember our baptism, and to reclaim the incorporation into relationship and covenant.

And the covenant service offers a time of dedication, where we respond to God's love and grace, offering the covenant prayer – a prayer, which has been spoken by generations of Methodists, declaring a renewal of our discipleship and faithfulness.

The past few years have been challenging, but God's love continues to sustain us. As God's faithfulness to the covenant endures, I invite us today to respond in faithfulness to God's act of incorporation. In a few moments, we will share in the Covenant Service as we dedicate ourselves in this new year of 2022 to the work of God in the world, to the selfless devotion of sharing God's grace, of proclaiming God's peace, and of working together that everyone may know God's love.

Wesley's Covenant Prayer: I am no longer my own. I am yours alone. Put me into what you will. Rank me with those you will. Put me to use for you. Put me to suffering for you. Let me be employed for you. Let me be laid aside for you. Let me be lifted high for you. Let me be brought low for you. Let me be full or let me be empty. Let me have all things or let me have nothing. With a willing heart, I freely give everything to your pleasure and use.