

St Paul United Church of Christ
5312 Old Blue Rock Road
Cincinnati, Ohio 45247
Allen M. Fluent, Transitional Pastor
Order of Worship for Baptism of Jesus Sunday
First Sunday after Epiphany
January 10, 2021

(As our congregation returns to holding worship in our building, we are conscious of the many people who will not be able to be physically present. Therefore, we will be continuing the practice of sending a worship bulletin to all who are on our mailing lists for email or hard copy. Those who will be worshipping from home and who have computer access will also be receiving a recorded version of the service that will be sent out by email on Sunday afternoon and also can be seen on our Facebook page. We welcome your participation in any way that is convenient for you, and we encourage you to share our worship service with any person you know who may appreciate receiving it.)

Morning Announcements and Prayer Requests

Prelude (recording begins)

Morning Praise: Psalm 29

*Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory of God's name; worship the Lord in holy splendor.
The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord over mighty waters.
The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.
The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
God makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox.
The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire.
The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in God's temple all say, "Glory!"
The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as ruler forever.
May the Lord give strength to the people! May the Lord bless God's people with peace!*

Hymn

Songs of Thankfulness and Praise

#243

***Songs of thankfulness and praise, Jesus, Lord, to you we raise;
once revealed when heaven's star brought the wise men from afar;
branch of royal David's stem in your birth at Bethlehem,
Word before the world began, God revealed to us in man.***

***God revealed in Jordan's stream, prophet, priest and king supreme;
once revealed in power divine changing water into wine;
Cana's holy wedding guest keeping to the last the best;
Word before the world began, God revealed to us in man.***

***God revealed in valiant fight, conquering the devil's might;
sins forgiven, sickness healed, life restored and God revealed;
once revealed in gracious will ever bringing good from ill,
Word before the world began, God revealed to us in man.***

Word of Prophecy

Isaiah 42:1-9

(the "servant" in Isaiah is an image of a leader who is faithful to God's will of justice for God's people)

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you, I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Hymn

When Jesus Came to Jordan

#241

***When Jesus came to Jordan to be baptized by John,
he did not come for pardon but as the sinless one.
He came to share repentance with all who mourn their sins,
to speak the vital sentence with which good news begins.***

***He came to share temptation, our utmost woe and loss,
for us and our salvation to die upon the cross.
So when the dove descended on him, the Son of Man,
the hidden years had ended, the age of grace began.***

***Come, Holy Spirit, aid us to keep the vows we make;
this very day invade us, and every bondage break.
Come give our lives direction, the gift we covet most:
to share the resurrection that leads to Pentecost.***

Gospel Lesson

Mark 1:1-11

*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,*

*“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”
John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”*

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Musical Interlude

Jake Rizer

Sermon

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” With these words, the author of the earliest Gospel begins his story. His language is tight – economical, with no literary flourishes. Because of that, some have regarded Mark’s writing as more primitive than the other Gospels, less learned, and perhaps less reflective of the author’s own thoughts and beliefs. But they are wrong. A closer look reveals a carefully woven plot to this story Mark tells. We have in Mark’s Gospel, not the story of Jesus’ life (his birth, his family, his birthplace, his childhood home; those things are told by others), but, as he says, “the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” beginning with his baptism and ending with his death and the wonderment that follows it.

The boundaries of the story are set by two significant, dramatic events that involve a tearing open, or tearing apart. The first is at Jesus’ baptism, the second, at the moment of his death. At the moment of his baptism, as Jesus comes up from the water, it is the heavens

themselves that are torn, to allow God's voice and Spirit to break through. At his death, it is the curtain of the temple, which separates the sacred place of God's presence from the area of human gathering that is torn. Symbolically, the temple's curtain represents the blue dome of the sky, believed in the ancient world to be a solid barrier separating earth from heaven; so these two fractures, each suggesting the breaching of the barrier between the realm of humanity and the realm of God, frame the beginning and the end of the story Mark wants us to know. Or to put it in the terms of our present liturgical season, Mark is telling us about the epiphany of God, which breaches the distance between earth and heaven to reveal God's true nature in the ministry of Jesus Christ, who is named God's true Son as he rises newly born from the baptismal water of the Jordan.

The story of Jesus' baptism is told with some variation in the three Gospels in which it is included. In Luke's Gospel, it appears that a dove – an actual bird – lands on Jesus, as a sign to all who saw it. In Matthew's Gospel, the word that comes to Jesus from the heavens is spoken in the third person, like a public proclamation to the crowd. But in Mark's earliest version of the story, the word from God is personal, and for that reason I like it best. "You are my son, the beloved," God says. "I am pleased with you." For Mark, the moment of Jesus' baptism is the moment he himself becomes conscious of who he is - God's child - and his calling to live in a way that is pleasing to God. Sometimes a father or a mother of a newborn child will take a long look at the child to see if he or she has features that resemble the parent. When they see such things, they are often pleased. But, even among human parents and children, it is more exciting still when the day arrives that the child says or does something that indicates a spirit of kindness or courage or helpfulness that reminds the parents of themselves or of their own deepest values.

To be in the image of God has nothing to do with physical features, of course; so what we mean when we say that Jesus is God's Son is that God found Jesus faithful to God's own Spirit of goodness, and it pleased God, and God told him so, and from that day forward he lived in the integrity of God's Word.

Think of this! When you were baptized, your parents presented you to God, or if you were older, perhaps you came yourself to God, and in the sacrament, we in the church prayed together that you would always know yourself as a child of God, as one who tries to live by the Spirit of goodness that was manifested in Jesus. And we all prayed that we would help you. Today, let's take a little time to remember and celebrate that day.

Blessing of the Water and Our Time of Prayer

This is the water of baptism, the sign of our new life in Christ. Water itself is sacred. Without it, life cannot exist. In our creation story told in the Book of Genesis, the wind

of God swept over the face of the waters to animate the world. When Jesus waded into the Jordan River and immersed himself in the water, he took upon himself the hopes and dreams and responsibilities of the servant people called by God to be a witness to the world of a new way of life.

This is the water of baptism; in it we are born anew, immersed in the Spirit of God, cleansed and made whole, so that we may become the body of Christ sent forth by God with the renewing vision of God's love.

As I pour the water, I ask you to remember the day your parents brought you to the church, or the day you came of your own volition, to receive the sacrament of grace and from thenceforth to be known and to know yourself as a child of God. A congregation was there, a fellowship of believers, who promised to care for you and to inspire you to live in the way of Jesus in the Spirit's power.

Come, Holy Spirit! Amen.

Prayer Hymn for the Spirit's Blessing

Breathe on me, Breath of God

#461

***Breathe on me, Breath of God, fill me with life anew,
that I may love what e'er you love, and do what you would do.***

***Breathe on me, Breath of God, until my heart is pure,
until with you I will one will, to do and to endure.***

***Breathe on me, Breath of God, so that your will is mine,
until this earthly part of me glows with your fire divine.***

Gracious Spirit, live within us. Live within our congregation. Empower us for the works that are needed to advocate for justice, to live in righteousness, to bring light to the world, to open blind eyes and free those in prison, to help and to heal and to bear the good news to all in need.

We lift up today all those in our congregation who are sick or shut-in, those who are lonely and those who are depressed, those who are living under financial stress, and those who endangered by their work to keep us safe and well.

Today, we recognize those who have been elected at our annual meeting to lead in the various ministries of our church during the coming year. May they walk in your Spirit, and may they be blessed with the insights they need to carry out the church's work.

In this troubled week in our nation's life, when many are frightened and many are filled with anger, because our democratic dream has fallen under grave scrutiny and some seem ready to turn to deceit and violence to have their own way, let us remember that, after his baptism, Jesus was cast into the wilderness of testing; and though wild beasts surrounded him, he was ministered to by angels.

As Jesus has taught us, so we pray:

Lord's Prayer

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**

Closing Hymn

Arise, Your light is Come

#231

*Arise, your light is come! The Spirit's call obey;
show forth the glory of your God which shines on you today.*

*Arise, your light is come! Fling wide the prison door;
proclaim the captive's liberty, good tidings to the poor.*

*Arise, your light is come! All you in sorrow born,
bind up the broken hearted ones and comfort those who mourn.*

*Arise, your light is come! The mountains burst in song!
Rise up like eagles on the wing, God's power will make us strong .*

Benediction

Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Postlude