

*This message was prepared by Rev. Pamela Graf Short for the People of Prayer of the Tontogany Presbyterian Church in Celebration of the Baptism of Jesus Christ and delivered on January 14, in the year of our LORD 2018.*

*Likewise it was on the occasion of Rev. Susan Meier's retirement. Rev. Meier served as the Maumee Valley Presbytery's Presbyterian for Common Life for the past eight years.*

*The message is based on and supported by the Good News of Mark 1:1-15*

**1**The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah,<sup>a</sup> the Son of God,<sup>b</sup> **2**as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way”<sup>c</sup> —

**3**“a voice of one calling in the wilderness,  
'Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.' ”<sup>d</sup>

**4**And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **5**The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. **6**John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. **7**And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. **8**I baptize you with<sup>e</sup> water, but he will baptize you with<sup>f</sup> the Holy Spirit.”

**9**At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. **10**Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. **11**And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” **12**At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, **13**and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted<sup>g</sup> by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

**14**After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. **15**“The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

In our Bible story for today the heavens split and the Spirit appears and love and delight are as clear and crisp as a fresh winter morning.

Today's story requires a giant leap from the manger to the banks of the Jordan; from a helpless babe to an adult walking.

One minute the lectionary cycle has Jesus floating in amniotic fluid and the next he is coming up out of the waters of the Jordan. It happens immediately.

Well, everything in Mark's Gospel happens immediately:

Immediately the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness;

Immediately they left their nets and followed

Immediately he called them

Immediately the leprosy left

Immediately he took up his mat and walked

Immediately they conspired against him

But now I am moving too fast and getting ahead of the story.

You see the beginning of the Good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begins for Mark in baptism. There is no birth narrative in this Gospel, unless of course you are a Presbyterian, in which case birth and baptism are held in tandem and water and spirit are not easily separated.

Every fisherman knows that water is a thin place between heaven and earth.

Some would say that we are drawn to water because they are convinced that all things came from a single ameba on an ancient shore.

Others would say we are drawn to water because we swim around in water while we are still in our mother's womb.

According to this story, we may be drawn to water because the Spirit of God is not far from it.

In Genesis we read that the Spirit swept over the face of the deep;

the Hebrew word for "swept over" is like a mother bird who sweeps watchfully to and fro and round and round over the nest of her young.

And now in this story this sweeping Spirit is seen diving down, down, down until it rests upon Christ Jesus.

The Holy Spirit... the Son of God... and now a voice.

"You are my child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Henri Nouwen insists that herein lays the core of the Good News of God; that "you are my Beloved".

"You are my Beloved" reveals the most intimate truth about all human beings

(Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*, page 30).

Central to our understanding of being human is our understanding that we are God's Beloved.

In the core of our baptismal stories lies the revelation of our true selves: children of God.

Rev. Meier, it is not unusual for retired people to wonder, perhaps like we did as teenagers,  
“Who am I... Who am I really?”

As life moves forward we identify ourselves by our roles:

- a student
- a bookkeeper
- a manager
- a teacher
- a business owner
- a farmer
- a telegraph operator
- a lawyer
- a village council person
- a pastor
- a draftsman
- a secretary
- a presbyter

Sometimes we identify ourselves by our skills:

- a knitter
- a carpenter
- a scrapbooker
- a singer
- a mechanic
- a dancer
- a snow shoveler
- a photographer
- a cook

It is common to identify ourselves by our relationships:

- someone’s kid
- or spouse
- or parent
- or aunt
- or cousin
- or grandparent
- or friend

But all of these roles...

All of these skills...

All of these relationships...are transitory; fleeting—

as in Mark’s Gospel changing immediately—like snow that touches a burning coal.

Yet when all else passes away, your identity as a child of God does not pass away.  
The core of who you are “God’s Beloved”  
is as true now as when you were being knit together in your mother’s womb;  
and when all other names have fallen away,  
your seal received on your baptismal day, “Beloved Child of God” cannot be unsealed  
and will not be removed  
by a change of address  
or occupation  
or vocation  
or title;  
it will not be removed by  
human loss  
or illness  
or dementia  
or death. †

The next movement in the text takes us into the wilderness.  
Most of my life I found this portion of the story quite troubling.  
I don’t like the idea that the Holy Spirit led Jesus into a place to be tempted or tested.  
Teachers and commentators have helped me along the way with this.  
Rather than being led into temptation,  
some offer the understanding that the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to take back what was rightfully  
God’s.  
Susan Garret sees this encounter with Satan, especially as offered in the Gospel of Mark,  
as reclaiming the Garden of Eden.  
The text leaves open the possibility that the wild beasts mentioned here were not attacking Jesus,  
but rather providing him companionship. “He was *with* the wild beasts.”  
By pairing the beasts in the same sentence as the angels who waited on him,  
the space between heaven and earth once again becomes a thin space with both beings of the earth  
and beings of the heavens together demonstrating compassion and loyalty to their Monarch.

I am not certain if your retirement will feel like a wilderness or like the Garden of Eden,  
but of this I am confident, that the Holy Spirit will be with you and the angels will attend you.  
Perhaps God will even send some wild ones to play with you along the way.

John the Baptist himself was a wild one.  
There is no evidence that he cautiously measured his words like a preacher who wants to keep her job.  
Know, this baptizer spoke dangerously and clearly about sin and its destruction  
and for that boldness it is in vs. 14 we read “John was put in prison”.

Loyal service to the Kingdom of God brings with it no guarantees of physical safety or soft beds.  
John the Baptist is handed over and his head lands not a feather pillow, but is served up on a platter.

As I awoke this morning in my warm house with my head on a down pillow  
I was soon aware that I am among the privileged;  
that other Christians were lying in chains of persecution with backs bruised and limbs festering.  
As we gather this morning in this beautiful sanctuary of grace,  
I am aware that our ancestors in the faith gathered secretly in cold and dreary caves.  
The church has long recognized that to be baptized with Christ is to be plunged into death.

Just as the infant Christ was identified as Royalty by the Wise Ones from the East and thus became a threat to King Herod,  
so too when we are crowned as a royal priests at the time of our baptisms,  
we become—no matter how tiny we are in physical size—  
a great threat to Satan who has not yet conceded victory to Jesus.

No, John was not spared and we may not be spared,  
but we may be quite sure that to be buried with Christ in baptism is also to be raised with Christ.  
To be buried with Christ in baptism is to see the heavens torn apart;  
it is to be touched by the Holy Spirit;  
it is to be named our true name, “Beloved”.  
To be baptized with Christ is to enter into the fullness of God’s time;  
To be baptized with Christ is to turn and see the Kingdom of God is at hand.  
To be baptized with Christ is indeed the beginning of Good News!

Now may our God who walks with you into the waters of baptism  
The One who names you Beloved  
Wash over you in mercy  
Raise you up in laughter  
And rest on you in  
Goodness,  
Honor  
Holiness  
&  
PEACE  
Now and for a thousand generations!