

Baptized and Baptizing

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Genesis 1: 1-5

Mark 1: 4-11

January 11, 2008 – UM

Will you join me in a moment of prayer?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer, amen.

Beginnings...

Possibilities....

I want you to close your eyes for a moment and remember a time when you were about to begin something...

Maybe a new year of school...

Maybe a new job...

Maybe a trip to somewhere that you have yearned to go to for years...

Maybe a new relationship...

On the brink of something... something as yet unformed... unknown... and unfamiliar...

What were some of your feelings?

Excitement?

Anxiety?

Eagerness?

A combination of all those things?

Beginnings are pregnant with possibilities.

Beginnings will take you to places and have you enter into experiences that you couldn't possibly imagine...

Beginnings hold the seed of future realities...

Out of a dream, a nothingness, something is created...

Our readings this morning mark beginnings.

The first reading is the very first part of our old testament or Hebrew scriptures.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...
In Hebrew, it is written as: In the beginning of God's creating...

Which speaks to me of ongoing creation, that God did not finish at the beginning of time...

That sentiment is echoed in the words of our creed which we proclaim each week: We believe in God who has created and IS creating.

Creation isn't finished; creation is ongoing.

God created the world with passion and possibilities...

And that passion and possibilities are ongoing and unfolding.

Bring into existence that which had only been imagined.

Think of a couple of our words that have their roots in the word creation:

Recreation or re-creation: a time for revitalization and renewal.

Pro-creation to bring forth something new... now usually pertaining to children.

There are probably others that I didn't think of.

And we can trust in a God, who has created and is creating...

Our second reading is from the first chapter in Mark's gospel.

And while it is the second book in order in the new or second testament, Mark is considered to be the gospel that was written the earliest.

Mark does not provide us with an account of Jesus' birth.

And there are some scholars who think that the accounts in Mathew and Luke are later additions to justify Jesus' Messiahship.

It doesn't matter to me...

Mark begins his account of Jesus' life and ministry with his baptism.

Jesus' baptism marked the beginning of Jesus public ministry and his unique relationship with God.

Each baptism that takes place within this faith community marks the beginning of a new relationship.

A new relationship with God and this community

Parents or people themselves make promises before God and this community and as they strive to live those promises, we too have a responsibility to them and to God.

And, as a faith community, we make promises.

It is a beginning, not an end...

And like all beginnings, it has wonder and excitement and anxiety and is wide open with possibilities...

How will we grow in faith and in love?

How will we respond?

How will God be active in our lives?

Big questions!

Baptism does not mean that each person is not loved by God whether or not they are baptized

It doesn't mean that if you die unbaptized you will not go to heaven.

What it does mean is that it is the beginning of something...

For parents, it is a public profession of their faith, for they are making promises on their child's behalf.

Some denominations don't do infant or child baptism, believing that the right time is when the person can make the decision for themselves.

So they offer a blessing or dedication ceremony for a child and their parents.

We in the United Church offer confirmation when a baptized child grows up and wants to confirm those promises that were made on our behalf.

Sometimes that happens as a teens, sometimes not until later.

Not all of us were baptized as infants or confirmed as teenagers.

I stopped attending church before I was confirmed and didn't attend church for close to 20 years... and so it wasn't until I was 35 that I made that public profession of faith for myself.

And it marked a new relationship with God and with my faith community.

A new creation...

Just what are those promises that we make?

These are the questions I ask of the parents or candidates themselves.

- Do you believe in God, Source of love; in Jesus Christ, God's love made human; and in the Holy Spirit, the power of God's love?
- Trusting the gracious mercy of God, will you turn from the forces of evil, and renounce their power?

- Will you follow the way of Jesus Christ?
- Will you join with your brothers and sisters in this community of faith to celebrate God's presence, live with respect in creation, and love and serve others?
- In baptism, you and your child mark an important step in your faith journey. Do you promise to share your faith with him or her bring him to worship, teach him about Christ's love, pray for him and when the time is right, encourage him to seek Confirmation?

And this is the promise that you, as a community of faith make:

- As a baptized and baptizing community, we commit ourselves to support and encourage you as brothers and sisters in Christ: nurturing one another in faith, upholding one another in prayer, encouraging one another in Jesus' ministry.

Just as Jesus did not know what God had in store for his life when he was baptized, neither we know what God has in store for us as individuals and as a community of faith.

Today, after worship, we are brainstorming ideas on the design of our sanctuary space.

This is not just an aesthetic exercise, although it includes that, but it is primarily a theological exercise... the overarching question being: What does our space say about our belief in God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit?

I have some additional questions for us to ponder:

- What does our sanctuary say about what we believe we are called to be as a community of faith?
- How is our space welcoming or not welcoming to newcomers, children, people with mobility challenges?
- Is our sanctuary a living, organic space or a static one which never changes?
- What does our sanctuary say about the style of worship we think is appropriate?
- About the instruments we use in worship?
- Is our sanctuary a shrine to the past or a doorway into the future?

Those are just some of the questions that I pondered this week... I have some more specific ones that we might discuss after worship... and you may have questions to add to this list.

These questions are only part of a much bigger question... who are we as a community of faith... what is our mission?

At this point, you might be saying to yourself: What does this have to do with baptism?

In baptism we are a new creation... called and claimed to participate in Jesus' ongoing ministry.

The people who first envisioned this church were not looking to the past, but to the future...

They undertook a challenge to bring together not just two congregations, but congregations of different denominations.

They were creating something new out of the ashes of the old.

They did not sit around a table and say, “We tried that, it didn’t work... or that’s not the way we have always done it... or we don’t have enough time, money, people, you name whatever you think we lack... to go ahead...”

They went ahead... creating something very new... trusting in God...

I have only been your minister for 6 months... but I have been learning about and thinking about United Memorial for about 18 months, ever since before my interview back in September 2007.

One of the things that I remember saying to the Search Committee, and those who were part of that may remember, “If you call me to be your minister and I accept, you are in for a shaking up... and are you ready for that and are you prepared to support it? If not, don’t call me.”

I was assured that you folks were ready for some changes.

You called me to minister with you because you believed that I had the gifts and skills necessary to be your leader into the next phase of our mutual ministry.

And I accepted that call knowing that there are challenges... but also excited about possibilities.

Possibilities of new life...

Possibilities that arise out of change... and change and transition are always challenging.

Because one of the facts of life, not just in churches... if we keep on doing things the same way... we will get the same results.... And you have indicated that you are not satisfied with the results you have been getting.

Some of the things that you named as priorities were getting new people, reconnecting with the community and balancing the budget.

All of those things are connected, but they will not happen if we don’t make some changes.

In my report to the Official Board in September I said: For some of you who are anxious for change, I may not initiate change quickly enough, for those whom change is a little more challenging, I may initiate change a bit too quickly.

What is important to remember that God always calls us into the future, a future unknown, but God is present with us, leading, guiding and empowering us.

Like most churches these days, we have blessings and challenges ahead of us. I am looking forward to the coming years as we discern God’s way forward.

I am not your perfect leader... neither are you the perfect congregation... we will each make mistakes...

Like any relationship there will be misunderstandings, hurt feelings, forgiveness and reconciliation...

There will also be love, joy, excitement and enthusiasm.

Much like any new beginning...

Jesus' baptism marked the start of his public ministry...

In our baptism we enter into the challenges and possibilities of that ministry too... we enter into the challenge and possibility of being the church in this time and place... 2009.

When the heavens were torn apart and the Spirit descended on Jesus as a dove and the voice of God was heard to say, "This is my Son, the Beloved."

Christina Berry, an on-line colleague wrote these very poetic words and I share them with her permission:

We plunge into the waters of baptism and underwater it seems quiet, almost peaceful.

It might be nice to stay right where we were when we were baptized – babies, warm and well-fed, waited on, someone responding to our every need.

Or maybe it would be nice stay with our heads ducked, as if we're still underwater.

But we can't stay underwater –

We have to breathe, to come up and break the surface.

We wade out of the river and dry off, and nothing is ever going to be the same.

Our baptism begins in the water, but it does not end there.

In fact our baptism is not completed until we die.

So at the font, our calling as ministers and disciples begins.

Following Jesus, up out of the river Jordan, we go out to be the beloved people of God. Named and claimed, we begin our ministry with Jesus, inviting others to come along with us, walking along under the dome of the heavens to share in his work. .

Knowing that we are named as God's own, in whom God is well pleased, we are made free –free to live in God's light, to love ourselves and our neighbors, to love the world, and to share the news that God has come to us.(Christina Berry – Sermon posted on Midrash January 10, 2009, quoted with permission)

Didn't she write beautiful words?

This sanctuary is not an escape from the world... it is a place which as our Mission Statement says: **A community in Christ, who come together to worship God; to grow in Christ; to**

support each other and thus renewed in the spirit, to go out to serve God as witness to that community.

In our baptism we are claimed by God... We are called by God into God's world... And God loves us.

As we take a few minutes to reflect on what it means to be a baptized and baptizing faith community, you are invited to come forward, dip your hand in the waters of baptism in this bowl... and take out a rock as a reminder of the promises you made in your baptism or reaffirmation of faith.

For those of you who are not baptized, you are invited forward to come forward as well... to reflect on Jesus' baptism and what it means to you.

My prayer for you is that each of you will hear God's saying, "You are my beloved."

Thanks be to God for love, for challenges and opportunities. Amen.