

A Baptism of Repentance

January 10, 2021 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Mark 1: 4-11



Reading — Mark 1: 4-11

Like many of you, my mind has been spinning in current events for much of this past week. After a blessed holiday hiatus from the headlines, I was first shook when I read way back on Tuesday morning, pre-insurrection, that according to the Washington Post's Fact Checker column "the president had set a new record with more than 500 lies in one day." Think about that. In a 24-hour span, he spewed over 500 statements of self-serving propaganda, disinformation and downright dishonesty. My first thought was compassion, or maybe pity is more like it. Can we imagine being the source of that level of toxicity and self-delusion? It's now clear to many of us, professional psychologists included, that we have a narcissistic sociopath for our President. Dangerous as that surely is for all of us, we mustn't forget that the man is not well. I truly believe he cannot help himself, that his psyche is incapable of tolerating defeat. Yes, compassion and pity for him and of course compassion and pity for the rest of us too. Considering our daily exposure to so many lies and knowing we are finally coming to the end of his term, it made me yearn for a nice long bath or shower. It's time, I thought, to start trying to wash some of it off if only to get ready for a cleaner start to the new year and to new leadership.

Then came Wednesday morning and with it what was looking like a new and more hopeful day. Watching the results come in from Georgia, I was texting with a few of the kids from our 2017 youth group Civil Rights Tour: "Remember meeting Rev. Warnock? On the way out church after attending services at MLK's historic Ebenezer Church in Atlanta?" No matter who you were pulling for, history was made on Wednesday as the 10th Black senator in US history and first in the Sunbelt, and with him the first Jewish Senator, were duly elected Georgia. A political triumph for Stacy Abrams, a genuine feat for grassroots organizers, and most importantly an at least partial restoration of trust in the fairness of the state's electoral process and procedures. Sinking into that warm bath was sounding even more appealing. Hold the bubbles, though. After all, we're still in the midst of a raging pandemic, economic downturn and living in a country where far too many people are believing those 500 lies, but I couldn't help but feel like our individual and collective's system could use a nice detoxifying cleanse. Such was the direction for the Baptism of Jesus Sunday sermon, a nice refreshing, renewing, hopeful kind of baptismal message, something that might have the feel of a warm bath for us all, or so I thought.

If you want to stop listening here and start running the tub, you have my permission, but there's a deeper invitation in our passage today and one that I think holds up to the events of the rest of the day on Wednesday and what's transpired since. It comes not from that well-known last line of solace and assurance when the Spirit says - "You are my beloved child, with you I am well pleased!" Instead, it comes from the opening line and is the reason Jesus found himself knee-deep in the Jordan in the first place. Verse 4: "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." So much for a warm bath of refreshment and renewal! John, and Jesus, have deeper waters in mind, and colder. A baptism of repentance!

The theme may at first strike us as out of touch with current events. Isn't there another scripture more on-point? Something from the prophets maybe or a story of Biblical sedition of which there are many? I wonder if you caught what Dick Durbin said from the Senate floor soon after Congress reconvened and in the early hours of Thursday morning. He said "This is a special place. This is a sacred place. This sacred place was desecrated by a mob today on our watch. This temple to democracy was defiled...by thugs, who roamed the halls – sat in this chair, Mr. Vice President." Surely the Bible has ample things to say about the defiling of temples! Indeed, but this notion of a baptism of repentance has been staying with me for I think it fits where we are right now and encapsulates something we desperately need as a nation.

No worries if it's not resonating yet. We may first need to recall that baptisms were and are communal affairs. So often we focus on Jesus, or all those cute little babies, thinking baptisms are mere individual or familial professions of faith. We can miss the fact that John's baptism was made available for an entire people, en masse. We see it most clearly in Mark's version of story. Verse 5: "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." It makes me wonder what counts for such communal rituals these days outside of local congregational settings.

At a national level, and in the face of defamed and profaned sacred institutions of our democracy, we've grown acutely aware recently of what are some of those necessary rituals of our American civic religion - rituals like voting and the typically "strictly ceremonial" acts like the certification of the electoral college entrusted to our high priests in the Senate and House. Durbin wasn't merely invoking the sacredness of the space itself at the Capitol Building, but of what happens inside of it.

This all led me to do some day dreaming yesterday about our processes and rituals for national repentance. Yes, we need the calls for resignation. Yes, we need calls for impeachment, accountability, and jail time! Yes, we need social media to step up and shut it down, finally! For Trump, for Hawley, for the dude in that despicable Camp Aushwitz t-shirt and ideally for whoever produced that shirt. There needs to be consequences harsh enough to deter anyone from going and doing likewise. But let's face it ... that's not enough! It's nowhere near enough for our problems run far deeper and are far more complex than our justice system alone can handle, especially given how broken it is!

Sidebar. One of my favorite children's sermons was offered by a member of our last church who sat on the chancel steps and gathered the kids around her. She then handed a small tube of toothpaste to each kid and ask them to uncap the tubes. You can see where this is going. Wasteful but totally worth it! She pulled out a big bowl, held it up in the middle of them and said "ok, go for it, squeeze it out!" The kids loved it! There was more toothpaste than even a dentist would ever want to see in one place. Then she said: Now, put it back! Brilliant.

Remember how I began the sermon. 500 lies a day! Some of the more interesting commentaries I'm reading are asking whether it's too late, whether we *can* put it back, whether we *can* repair, whether we can "restore" and to what exactly. In his short but mighty book "On Tyranny," Yale historian Timothy Snyder warns of two dangerous kinds of politics, two different ways of seeing time, really. On the one hand, he says, "we allowed ourselves to accept the *politics of inevitability*, the sense that history could move in only one direction: toward liberal democracy." We let our guard down, no longer needing to look at our past in any complex detail, but just for confirmation of our narratives of progress. 'Slavery

is a thing of the past. The confederacy is dead. We've had civil rights! We've had a Black President and now a black female Vice President.' Onwards. Not "onwards, march" mind you but "onwards, relax, it's gonna be ok, it'll all work out eventually, it has too, so don't sweat it. On the other hand, is the *politics of eternity*. Snyder said "Its mood is for longing for past moments that never really happened during epochs that were in fact disastrous. Eternity politicians bring us the past as a vast misty courtyard of illegible monuments to national victimhood.... Every reference to the past seems to involve an attack by some external enemy upon the purity of a nation." It's MAGA, right? Make America Great Again, he says. And now that I've got you all ginned up, let me reign, eternally! Both are wildly ahistorical approaches that have left us wondering if we are at the brink of tyranny.

After noting the painfully obvious disproportionality of response to Wednesday's incidents of call-it-what-you-want — domestic terror, insurgence, sedition — as compared to Black Lives Matter protests, several commentators have said what was most in evidence on our screens, rising up in those very centers of political power, were the deeply historic and embedded legacies of white privilege and white supremacy. How else would so many have been let free to roam those halls and let loose to enjoy their days after? Yet given a full accounting of our nation's history I'd say the real shame of the matter is that any of us were surprised! You know who wasn't surprised when Trump was elected and who wasn't surprised when Wednesday happened in the wake of Warnock and Ossoff's and Harris's historic wins? Most people of color I know and some Jews as well. Shame on the rest of us for being surprised! Shame on us for not knowing our history or for that matter the current experience of Black Indigenous Persons of Color well enough to join them in not being surprised. For this *is* America! This *is* who we are! And shame on me for thinking however momentarily that Wednesday's events were just 5 years in the making that we could somehow wash this nightmare off because we have a new president ready to return us to our liberal democracy that has yet to fulfill its promise.

So, what of our rituals for confession and repentance? Lincoln knew we needed something like it when he issued a Proclamation Appointing a National Fast Day on March 30, 1863. "And whereas it is the duty of nations as well as of men, to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions, in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon" Google the rest! Its stunning and in its prescience!

All this has led me to daydream about turning Lincoln Monument Reflecting Pool into a lasting, national baptismal font! And we need a contemporary John or Johanna the Baptizer appearing amidst our current political wilderness and chaos calling us from city and countryside, calling us to a collective baptism of repentance. Yes, we need whatever accountability we can muster from our lawmakers and our justice system, broken as it is. And we need it this week. But it strikes me that we also need to slow it down, to take along we view, and a good hard look in a mirror or reflecting pool to what's really happening to us and to our nation! For what is repentance if not a gesture of reflection, of owning and taking responsibility for where we have sinned and erred and changing our course of action. We need more than a justice to convict the few, but a mercy system that can convict and convert us all, one bold enough to let us all publicly embrace the truth of and repent of our nation's white supremacist past and present. To do so, we need to believe there is a space wide enough for that level of grace, arms wide enough to embrace us even as we are coming to terms with the truth of history. And that grace, that grace, does not come from us! It can only come from above, as if from the heavens, descending like a dove! And here's the thing: Jesus would be right there, on the shores of whatever river, basin or reflecting pool, in line with all the rogue offenders, all those who stand idly by and all the victims too

who surely have their own sins because who doesn't. That's Jesus point in being there with that crowd on the shore — to bear with them and all of us this weight of being human.

In the words of Kate and Peter's stunningly beautiful hymn, the Spirit says to us all: Come!

Come all you thirsty to the River
Hear where the word runs cool and deep,
Come with the outcasts crushed and broken,
Come you who rage and you who weep.

I want to blast this hymn across this Washington mall for weeks to come! I want to let its gentle, modal, down-up-down melody wash like waves on the shores of our souls. I want to let its profound lyrics ring true for all to hear:

Come to the good forgiving River
Here where the word runs calm and clear
Wash in the truth that frees the spirit,
Shed the excuses you hold dear

Wash in the truth! Yes, praise God (and thank you, dear Kate). After 5 years of lies, after 400 years of half-told history, that's the collective work ahead for all of us and for our nation! To wash in the truth that frees the spirit!

Even if you aren't a fan of my daydream (and yes, I realize there are some separation of church and state difficulties here, I do get that) I invite us all to take some extra time this week and spend some time in meditation with this hymn! Call up a recording of today's service up on our YouTube channel after 5 pm tonight and go back to the first hymn. Listen, sing or hum it in the shower or tub! Print it off your screen and set it by your bedside or meditation chairs!

Come to the strong renewing River
Here where the word runs sweet and wild,
Come by God's gift though undeserving,
Come because God has called you child.

A jolt of accountability tomorrow perhaps, and in the coming days. But, I pray proverbial baths, showers and baptisms of repentance as well in the weeks, months and even years ahead. For we all need something deeper than our justice system will allow. We need truth beyond our biases. We need mercy beyond measure. We need something deeper, something powerful enough to let the heavens open and let God's face and voice and song descend on us all:

River of Life what deep compassion,
Feeds your eternal mercy song
God's own face shines in you reflected
Calling us back where we belong.

When we've so repented, when we've so heard this beautiful call, perhaps then can we be all the bolder to say and pray again "God Bless America," this beautiful yet broken people! Perhaps then, with Jesus,