

Psa. 29:0 *A Psalm of David.*

¹ Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

² Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name;
worship the LORD in holy splendor.

Psa. 29:3 The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD, over mighty waters.

⁴ The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.

Psa. 29:5 The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.

⁶ He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.

Psa. 29:7 The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.

⁸ The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

Psa. 29:9 The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all say, "Glory!"

Psa. 29:10 The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.

¹¹ May the LORD give strength to his people!
May the LORD bless his people with peace!

Gen. 1:1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³ Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Mark 1:4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

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. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ 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. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Mark 1:9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Baptism of the Lord Sunday

This has been a different kind of week for me and perhaps for many of us.

Last Monday, as I was preparing the bulletin for today's service, I felt some sadness. Baptism-of-the-Lord Sunday has always been a favorite worship for me, right at the beginning of the new year. It's an opportunity to remember the baptism of Jesus Christ and reaffirm our own baptismal vows; it's a Sunday to use the baptismal font, make it look a bit like the river Jordan, and fill it with rocks and shells and then water; it's a time to anoint one another with oil to symbolize the presence of the Holy Spirit.

But because of our continuing Covid-19 shut-down, none of this hands-on, tactile part of our worship is possible, since we won't be together in person. So I reflected once again on how

much I miss worshipping in our sanctuaries with the whole congregation present. We have all been prudent and brave in the face of this pandemic, determined to keep worshipping on zoom, and working hard to stay connected. Most of the time, we are doing alright with our sheltering-in-place, and then occasionally, a sense of loss and sadness still rises to the surface.

And then on Wednesday, January 6, the day of Epiphany, a message came across my computer screen about a mob having entered the Capitol Building in Washington DC. I quickly scanned various news sites, and was shaken by what I saw and read. A mob in our national capital, acts of insurrection, chaos in the chambers of the House and Senate, and injuries, even deaths? This is shocking, this sort of thing happens elsewhere, I had always thought, not in our nation. All day long I was shocked, sad, and weary as more news came in. I was so relieved when Congress reconvened later that evening to continue the electoral count and concluded it early on Thursday, January 7.

How ironic, I later thought, that these shocking events in our nation's capital occurred on Epiphany! Remember, *epiphany* means revelation, means making something apparent, making it clear and obvious, So what did the events of Epiphany week 2021 and Epiphany Day reveal, what did they bring to the surface for us and make apparent?

This is what has become more clear and apparent for me this week: The need for spiritual and moral grounding of our human lives is more important than ever, and focusing on the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ and on our own baptismal vows is essential for that spiritual and moral grounding. So let's look at baptism, at Jesus' baptism and our own. What does it entail, what does it mean?

Baptism has to do with water. Our Call to Worship from Psalm 29 and our reading from Genesis 1 remind us that the beginning of creation somehow involves water, with the presence of God hovering above the watery mess, the waters of chaos. And graciously, the power of God is able to create order out of such swirling chaos and brings about goodness and life! From such Scripture passages, from sacred stories like these comes our firm belief that, even in the midst of chaotic events in our lives now, the Spirit of God continues to be present to evoke order, goodness, and life; and the voice of God continues to call us and commission us to service.

And in baptism, whether we are stepping into the water and go under or are sprinkled with water on our head, we are reminded that God is stronger than all chaos, disorder, disaster, brokenness, and sinfulness. In baptism we are washed, we are cleansed, we are made ready for new life; because we are baptized by water and the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus was baptized by water and the Holy Spirit. And by the grace and power of God we have new life in Christ through baptism.

Because we are not able to actually enact the liturgy for Baptism of the Lord Sunday this year, I want to draw our attention to two important aspects of this liturgy, so that we would note some of the words that are spoken, and some of the questions and answers that are given, at each baptism. First are the renunciations, and the question to the person to be baptized (or to the sponsors) goes like this:

*Trusting in the gracious mercy of God,
do you turn from the ways of sin
and renounce evil and its power in the world?*

So baptism means that we renounce sin and evil! If we are not sure what constitutes sin and evil, the apostle Paul has a list for us: *fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions,*

envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these... those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:19-21) We might add a few other things to this list of sin and evil, updated for our own time and place: lying, extortion, exploiting others, perpetuating injustice. Turn away from those things and renounce them, we are told in baptism, because they sap the life right out of us, because this sort of evil behavior saps life and energy from individuals, from communities and entire societies. So renounce it, turn away from it! This is the first thing we promise in our baptism, or our parents and godparents promised that if we were baptized as infants.

Then there is a second question, also about “turning”:

*Do you turn to Jesus Christ
and accept him as your Lord and Savior,
trusting in his grace and love?*

And this is question is immediately followed by a third one

*Will you be Christ's faithful disciple,
obeying his Word and showing his love?*

So there is a second turning required, one that turns our hearts, souls and minds to Jesus Christ. And only when the answer is “yes” to the double turning —turning away from sins and evil, turning to Jesus Christ— can there be a baptism in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

So the Christian life, the baptized life means a double turning: from sin and evil, to Jesus Christ.

The Christian life, the baptized life also means faithful discipleship, and obedience to Jesus’ Word, and showing his love in all we say and do.

This week, we heard a lot of words and then saw a lot of action, and as I mentioned earlier, the events on Wednesday, on Epiphany were shocking to me. As Barry Black, Rear Admiral (ret.), Chief of Chaplains of the US Navy (ret.), and

now chaplain to the US Senate said on Jan 6, 2021, “*These tragedies have reminded us that words matter, and that the power of life and death is on the tongue.*”

Words matter indeed, our words as those who are baptized into Christ; and actions matter, our actions within our congregations and the wider community. We can make a difference, even when there is divisiveness and strife at the national level, we can make a difference even when the nation is supposedly divided into different groups and parties and camps. We can make a difference right here in Two Rock and Tomales, in Sonoma County and Marin County, because we are actually one in Christ. On the cover of your bulletin you have a quote from the letter to the church in Ephesus:

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:4-6)

We can make a difference as congregations, because we have turned away from discord and strife, we have turned to Jesus Christ, and we are committed to show his love, as one people, in word and deed. That is our true mission!

And so I invite us, as we worry about what upheaval might happen next in Washington DC and what new misery might result from Covid-19 and the ongoing lockdown in our counties, to take action and speak up. Please, each of you, call three people this week, people from our congregation or people in the community. Find out how they are, listen to what’s on their minds, encourage them, share some laughter.

Let us model for ourselves and others that it takes just simple acts of kindness to build community, that it takes just simple words of caring to reconnect with others. Let us model for ourselves and our children how living a baptized life shapes us and makes our world a better place right here, right now.