

“Gotcha Day”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

1-10-21 Baptism of the Lord Sunday

Based upon Mark 1:4-11; Eph. 1:3-14

I picked the title of today’s sermon, “Gotcha Day,” weeks ago, when I was anticipating doing a happy little sermon today for Baptism of the Lord Sunday on our being adopted children of God. “Gotcha Day” is how many adoptive parents refer to the day when they finally can wrap their arms around their new adopted son or daughter and welcome the child home to be a part of the family forever. Usually, I get to spritz people with water today. I can’t do that virtually, so I wanted something light and happy to make up for that fact. But Wednesday night changed my plans and the plans of preachers all around the country. A mob of insurrectionists stormed the Capitol building intending to prevent our elected government leaders from doing their job to certify the electoral college votes from the 2020 election. The mob broke windows and damaged property, carried and set off bombs, tried to find and harm members of Congress, beat police officers, and walked around the halls of Congress with a smug sense of entitlement, carrying flags that implicitly and expressly rejected our democracy and Bibles, while evoking the name of Jesus to justify their behavior. By the end of the evening four people were dead; a fifth died soon after. Like many or most of you, as I watched on the news people gleefully and unrepentantly ripping at the fabric of our democracy, I was horrified and sickened by what I saw. Suddenly the idea of doing a happy little sermon seemed not only inappropriate but irresponsible, and suddenly the title “Gotcha Day” seemed to take on a sinister tone I had never intended.

In the days since the insurrection, I have asked myself repeatedly, “How should our faith inform our response to this situation?” I thought about preaching on evil or injustice. I thought about continuing last week’s message about going home another way. But ultimately, I came to realize that the texts on which I was originally going to preach spoke in their own way, and in an important way, to the circumstances in our country right now, so I decided not to change them. We find ourselves in this mess in part because we have an identity problem in the United States. “Identity politics” has changed how people see themselves and others to such a degree that we have become blind to all kinds of truths, including the larger truth about who we are, and who we are called to be as a nation and as children of God. Identity politics has also made it impossible for some people to recognize the huge difference between the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and so-called Christian nationalism, neo-Nazism, and white supremacy. So, although I am not going to preach partisan politics to you from this sacred space—relax, I know that’s not my job—I do want us to consider today’s texts and the events of Wednesday together, rather than using worship to try to escape from reality. Although it is tempting to want to escape, we find ourselves in this situation in part because so many people chose that instead of embracing reality. We must face the truth in order to know the difference between the false gospel we witnessed on Wednesday and the real one. I also believe that if more people could embrace the truths today’s texts affirm, the less likely we would be to see horrific events like Wednesday’s repeated.

Today’s Gospel begins in the wilderness, with a wild-eyed and hair-covered John the Baptist calling on people to confess their sins and repent and change their ways. That’s as good a place as any for us to start whenever we are trying to make sense of a crisis and how we got here,

because human sinfulness is behind most of the problems in the world, and repentance opens the doors in our minds and hearts to change. But in Mark's gospel, beginning with John the Baptist's ministry is also an interesting place to start because it means about 30 years of John and Jesus' lives have been left out. *Matthew* and *Luke* both tell the story of Jesus' life beginning even before his birth. Mark's gospel doesn't have a birth narrative, which means that when, in verse 9, a guy named "Jesus from Nazareth" shows up on the scene in the wilderness, if we hadn't heard the Gospel before, we would have no idea who he was. *Mark* was the first of the four canonical gospels to be written, so there were plenty of people in his day who would have picked up the story and not known all that we already know about Jesus. They wouldn't find anything in his account of John the Baptist to give them a clue either. *Luke* tells us John and Jesus were cousins. (See *Luke* Chapter 1.) *John* has John the Baptist pointing at Jesus and saying, "Behold the Lamb of God who will take away the sins of the world." (John 1:29). *Matthew* has the two men disputing the appropriateness of a non-sinners Jesus being baptized. (Matt. 3:13-15). But in *Mark*, Jesus just shows up to get baptized with no introduction at all.

Mark was no dummy, however. He wanted people to recognize that Jesus was the Messiah and knew that he would have to reveal something more about Jesus' identity to keep his readers reading. So before going any further, Mark tips us off to who Jesus was and is through the story of his baptism. When the heavens split, the dove descends, and we, as well as Jesus hear the words: "You are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased," we learn what we need to know. Jesus of Nazareth isn't an ordinary guy. He is *God's* son, and even before he has done anything for God, he is beloved and a source of pleasure.

In the process of telling us about Jesus' identity, Mark also hints at the nature of his ministry by saying that the heavens were "torn apart" to let the Spirit descend on Jesus. The other gospels say "opened" as if God just opened a window to let the dove out. But Mark uses the dramatic verb "tear," as if to describe a more dramatic change, in this case not in the fabric of democracy, but in the boundary between God and the world. Something was opened that day could not be easily closed. At the end of his gospel, after Jesus dies on the cross, Mark makes it clear it would never close by using that word tear again to describe how the curtain of the Temple, which separated the Holy of Holies where God was thought to dwell from the part of the Temple where the people could go, split in two from top to bottom. (Mark 15:38). In between these two texts, Mark sets up story after story about Jesus' ministry in such a way that they demonstrate that Jesus came to break through barriers. But this is critical— he did not come to behave like the mob that smashed windows and doors on Wednesday with violence. He didn't come to smash barriers so he could oppress others. He came to break through the barriers in Creation and culture which separate humanity from God, and human beings from each other. In other words, he came to give them access to God and reconcile them to each other.

The author of *Ephesians* says that this was God's plan from the very beginning. Accordingly, one of the barriers that Jesus had to break through was the barrier between Jews and Gentiles, because in Jesus' day that religious divide was as much or more significant as our political divisions are today. Jews and Gentiles did not really understand each other, and they certainly didn't value each other. But God had a plan to fix that. Through Christ, God's Beloved, God was going to adopt all of humanity, so that both Jews and Gentiles would know themselves

to be “beloved” as Christ was. As Lamar Williamson summed it up, “In Mark, Jesus’ baptism establishes his identity. In Paul, the baptism of believers establishes our identity. Jesus is who God says he is. So also are we.”¹ Through Christ we are the adopted children of God, and family to each other.

Unfortunately, just because God has done this in Christ does not mean that we fully appreciate what God has done. We clearly don’t because there are so many people in the world who feel like they or others are anything but beloved and chosen. Believe it or not, even the narcissists of the world feel this way deep down inside, and I wouldn’t be surprised if some of the people strutting around the Capitol displaying a nauseating sense of white entitlement also do. Bullies and oppressors, as well as those who are easily seduced by conspiracy theories and cults like QAnon, are frequently motivated by low self-esteem. Underlying the rage and the hatred, the anger and the violence, we are seeing in our society now a deep-seated pain held by so many people caused by their fear that they don’t matter. They see things happening in the world that they don’t like and think, “This proves that no one cares about me. No one listens to me. No one thinks about what I want.” For some people layoffs and financial challenges have led them to feel this way. For others, cultural changes make them feel this way. For some it’s systemic injustice, for others the news makes them feel this way. It’s not a liberal or conservative problem; it’s a ubiquitous one. All around the country are people who feel that society doesn’t value them enough, and many of them are right, it doesn’t.

I was thinking this past week about the vaccine rollout, for example. All the states have to find a way to prioritize who gets the shots because there isn’t enough vaccine and there aren’t enough medical professionals for everyone to get the shot on the same day. That’s an objective logistical problem. But the language that is being used to solve it is value laden. The people who are deemed by authorities to be “essential” are the first to get the shots. Now I ask you, essential to whom, essential to what? We may not all be hospital workers who clearly are critical to the survival of humanity, or teachers who are essential to families with young children, but to tell anyone who works around the clock in a job, any job, in order to provide for his or her family, that he or she is not essential is a hurtful lie. Everyone— old and young and middle aged, working or retired, successful or struggling is essential to someone. No one wants their loved ones to die. And even those who have no human being around them to call them beloved are essential, because they, like everyone else, are beloved and essential to God.

Years ago, I read a story about a family called the Shilcocks. The mother, Anne, worked in a hospital where there was a young boy with spina bifida and hydrocephalus. He was wheelchair-bound and dependent on tubes to enable his body to perform even the most essential and basic functions of breathing, eating, and relieving himself. Many people couldn’t see anything more in him than a tragedy or a challenge. But Anne Shilcock didn’t see him like that. She saw him as a big-hearted child who just wanted to be loved. So, against the recommendations of the hospital, she brought him home and adopted him. She had to train for 8 months on how to take care of him before she could do so, but it was worth it to her because to

¹ Williamson, Lamar, *Mark, Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1983), 35-36.

her, he was beloved. Soon other brothers joined the family, until there were 19 Shilcock children, all with different special needs, all equally essential. They became a part of a family where they were cherished, as they deserved to be.²

The Gospel teaches us that God is like Anne Shilcock on steroids. God sees every single one of us as essential and beloved, from the beautiful, powerful, and successful to the people society deems invisible or expendable. God doesn't care about our abilities, our gender identity, our skin color, our politics, and especially not our value to society. God came in Christ, lived, died, and rose again so that we would know that we are valued beyond measure. I can't help believing that if we really understood that, then people wouldn't be so easily taken in by those who tell them what they want to hear— that they are special and loved— without meaning a word of it, nor would people allow the bad behavior of some towards them to define how they see themselves. We wouldn't need other people's affirmations so much, and we wouldn't need to dominate others to prove our worth because we would know that we were chosen and loved by God.

I can't physically spritz you with water today to remind you of this truth. I look forward to the time when I can. But I invite you today to spend some time with water thinking about it. Stand in the shower and let the water run over your head or wash your hands slowly for the ten trillionth time, but this time really feel in the touch of the water on your skin God saying, "Oh my beloved, I love you so much." Think about all that God went through to adopt you. God came into a troubled world, lived, suffered, and died in Christ for us. God gave absolutely everything so that we would know God has claimed us. That is how much we were wanted. That is how much we are loved.

If we all have been adopted by God through Christ, however, then that means that part of our God-given identity is to be children who have a really big, diverse family. This is what the insurrectionists really don't get. Democracy is grounded in diversity, not uniformity, and so is God's kingdom. To be special to God doesn't mean you are *more* special than others or *more* entitled. To be beloved doesn't mean you can do no wrong either. It means you must think of everybody, not just yourself. You must learn to consider the needs of your whole God-given family and serve them in Christ's name. Only when we are accountable to each other and all experience justice and grace will God's plan be fulfilled.

Think about the Jews and Gentiles again. When they both first started being drawn to Christ, it must have been inconceivable to them that they could ever be able to worship side by side, let alone that they would want to do so. "But those people cut off their foreskins and won't even eat a nice ham and cheese sandwich," the Gentiles probably thought, while the Jews were muttering, "But those people can't even tell the difference between the one true God and Caesar their oppressor. They think he is a god!" It's hard living in a big family. But the hope is with faith and God's help, we will come to recognize that whether we like them or not, the people who push all our buttons are part of our family, and therefore, we must not hurt them. Basically, the message that God has given us in Christ is like the message a mother gives to her firstborn

² LeBlanc, Rena Dictor, "Home is Where the Heart Is," in WOMAN'S DAY, June 4, 2002, 62-64.

when the reality kicks in that the new baby in the house isn't ever going to go away. God says in Christ to us, "I will always love you. You are very special to me. But this little one is part of our family too. Get used to it, stop whining, help me take care of her, and share your toys."

This is the theological demand of the Gospel, the plan of the God we serve. I will be the first to confess that it's not an easy one when we see people attacking the things we deeply love. My first reaction when I saw the news on Wednesday was not one of Christian compassion for the people in the mob. As a former lawyer I want justice. I want arrests. I think accountability is necessary for healing. I value the Constitution and democracy deeply, and do not want them destroyed. Moreover, I know that the divisions in our country have been growing for so long, that they aren't going to go away just simply by making everyone say, "I'm OK and you're OK." But if we want to claim that we are doing the work of Christ, we must move beyond the desire for judgment and vengeance, and the yearning to make people do our will, to embracing God's will instead. Division and destruction are not of God, reunion and restoration are. We all are loved. We all are essential, and we all are meant to live together equally valued in peace. May God have mercy upon us during these difficult days, so that we can find our way into this truth and into God's future with hope, with the help of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.