

What's Tugging at Your Soul?
Mark 1:4-11
Wilton Presbyterian Church
Rev. Shannon White
January 10, 2021: Baptism of the Lord

After a week off, I was greeted on Facebook with this meme this past Monday written by a fellow pastor:

“This year I want to be more like Jesus:
Hang out with sinners; Upset religious people;
Tell stories that make people think;
Choose unpopular friends;
Be kind, loving and merciful;
Take naps on boats.”

Jesus was one of a kind, and if I had lived during his days here on earth... I hope I would have been drawn by his countercultural approach to life. I hope I would have seen the way he brought transformation to the lives of those he touched... in real time. I hope I would have stood up to the injustices he spoke about, as others were also making those choices to follow this leader... who called people to critique the very powers of the state, even at grave risk to themselves.

Throughout the history of the church, following Jesus has not always been popular or easy. In following and doing as Jesus taught, some have been ostracized, some have even died... and all have been bathed in love. At the same time, those who have followed Jesus have found amazing hope and new life. Transformation and healing not only for themselves but for the communities around them.

It all started with this scene depicted in the scripture lesson this morning. With his baptism, Jesus was infused with the Holy Spirit, giving him the

power to do what God had in store for him in his life. Not only that, but in that same act came the affirmation that he was God's own beloved, in whom God was well pleased. From that life-affirming, loving scene... Jesus is driven out into the wilderness to begin facing the world of inner and outer brokenness.

God knew, that the power of the Holy Spirit along with the affirmation of identity as God's child--of his utter belovedness would be necessary to carry out such a life of ministry. How much more for us!!!

That template is the same for us~~the power of the Holy Spirit, and the affirmation that we are God's own beloved in whom God is well pleased.

Unlike Jesus—who was tempted and did not sin, we, as human beings do sin. We are all broken... Hence, John's call to repent.

For some of us those words of repentance may be a turnoff. Some may think... I haven't done anything wrong....

But this is a time to reflect and to see how we may have contributed to brokenness. Brokenness in our own lives, in the lives of those we love and as participants in our broader world.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, says, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

It's just a human reality. The good news is that this scene shows us that we don't have to live in shame... that as we confess the sin in our lives, the Power of the Holy Spirit is able to bring healing to us and all those around us. But we must be willing to reflect and ask for forgiveness.

In churches such as ours, in upper middle-class neighborhoods, we have a different challenge in following the Gospel and responding to our baptismal call than those who face oppression each and every day due to race or religion. We are shielded by so much on a systemic level...

which has the potential to create blind spots for us. But those very blind spots can serve to separate us from fully obeying God's commandments ~~ to live out our baptismal calling.

Repentance is at the core of our faith. It is a turning from behavior so that a new behavior may come... so that we may be ready to do the work to which God calls us.

So, of what do you and I need to repent? Your mind, like mine, may go to individual sins... and that is all well and good. We need to reflect and release those things which have caused us to be blocked.

But of what do we need to repent as a people? Wednesday's display at the Capitol building showed us a lot. I admit that I was glued to the television, as I am sure many of you were on Wednesday afternoon. I was stunned at the blatant disregard for decency and norms which have held our democracy together; shocked to see arrogance and entitlement in such a bold manner; angry over a refusal by so many to see and abide by the simple truth of a lost election and outraged to see the on full display the desire to take hold of power at any cost and perhaps even more shocking... the disparity of response to crowds by law enforcement that day compared to those over the summer during the black lives matter rallies; I was extremely saddened by the loss of the illusion I had held that it really hadn't gotten this bad and that surely people wouldn't come to this; But it had. The hangover of those feelings held onto me through Thursday when I wondered, how in the world could I preach with this as a recent backdrop?

So, I went back to the text... what in me needed repentance, I thought? For a refusal to do anything would surely leave me numb and ineffective at being a light and healing presence in the world. Our call is to be transformed into Christ's likeness for the sake of the world not for the sake of my own salvation personally.

Last week, we celebrated Epiphany, and began the season called by that same name. I like to talk about epiphany as an “a-ha” moment, when a truth is revealed that was already there. So, in the season of Epiphany, we look for what is being revealed in us and around us. Perhaps for the first time, some of us will begin to understand the insidiousness of white supremacy as witnessed on Wednesday where the established power system moved to use violence and terror to maintain its power and control. It was the same dynamic King Herod used when trying to manipulate the Magi. The good news then, is that the magi were empowered by God to resist evil and find a new way home.

Almost two weeks ago, on December 28, I got word that one of our sister congregations in the presbytery, the Martin Luther King Jr. Community Presbyterian Church in Springfield MA, had burned early that morning. It has now been determined to be as a result of arson. It’s an historic church, mostly African American, and it has a mighty voice in that city as well as in our presbytery. The pastor, the Rev. Dr. TerryIn Curry Avery, preached for us via zoom last July 19. Her training – not only as Presbyterian clergy – but also as a psychologist out of Yale – has given her the ability to be agile and hopeful in spirit as she leads her congregation through this very difficult time.

The day after the fire, I felt a call to go and be a witness of hope and light for her and for that congregation. My daughter Peyton and I drove up to Springfield MA not knowing if we would see anyone there. We stopped outside the boarded-up church and waited. A car drove by and we waved. We began a conversation with a man and woman who had been long-time members of the church. We brought them greetings from WPC and told them we would be praying for them and supporting them in whatever way we could. They were appreciative. So was their pastor with whom I’ve been in touch several times over these days since.

The thing is... throughout my life, I have always felt a call to racial justice. In these last years, I have been stagnant, in a way, living in this mostly white community. However, my heart has continued to be opened up over the last year as our country has witnessed the continuing legacy and threat that white supremacy plays in our lives (including this past Wednesday). It affects us all. As I have done some work on it through reading books such as *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to talk about Racism*, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity*, and now *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents*, my eyes have been opened even more to the ways in which the lies of white supremacy have blinded most white Christians, resulting in **keeping us in bondage**...The internal work I've done over this year has freed up energy in me to be more available to those who are suffering. **Not doing the work** was killing my spirit and keeping me from living out my calling.

But hear this... It's nothing for me to be bragging about. I realized that I had not been in touch with our friends at Grace Baptist, with whom we have had an on-going relationship for years. They are just a few miles down the road. I've done the work when it's been convenient, feeling taxed by the pandemic.

My colleague, Rev. Dr. Curry Avery reminded me yesterday... her folks always have had to deal with racism... along with the pandemic. So true... I encourage you to join me in prayer and think about how we might respond.

If this pandemic has taught us anything, it is that we are more than our external activities which have kept us frenzied at times. When it all stops... as it has... what moves and shapes you? What makes your soul ache? How DO you/how do I respond to the call of God in your life?

Repent and be forgiven...so we live out that calling!