



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Eugene, Oregon
“At Home” Worship
January 10, 2021

Leading in Worship Today:
Ursula Damgaard, Music Director
The Rev. Marta Z. Ukropina
Liturgist: Darlene Valtinson

Gathering Around God’s Word

Call to Worship

In the beginning, God created the world,
and God blessed it:
“It is good.”
In the beginning, God created light, and
God blessed it:
“It is good.”
In the beginning, God created life, and
God blessed it:
“It is good.”
Since the beginning, God has not
stopped creating,
calling us closer to all that is good.

Opening Hymn

Morning Has Broken

#664

Call to Confession

Let us confess our sins, giving thanks for the grace of Jesus Christ, the one who has come to save us.

Prayer of Confession

God of all glory, you look from heaven and see us as we are—not worthy to kneel at your feet, not ready to welcome your way. Forgive us, gracious God. In Christ, stoop down to save us; loosen the ties that bind us to sin and set us free to love and serve you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

Hear the good news of the gospel: As a voice from heaven said to Jesus, so God says to each of us: You are my beloved child, and with you I am well pleased. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Thanks be to God.

The Word

Prayer for Illumination

Send down your Holy Spirit, O God and speak to us as beloved children so that we may hear and believe the good news of your Word made flesh, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Readings

Old Testament Reading: Genesis 1: 1-5

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 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. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

New Testament Reading: Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

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

Anthem

Thy Word

Sermon *"Without Undue Haste or Undue Delay"*

The Rev. Marta Z Ukropina

Work for a sermon usually starts with scripture and prayer. We preachers read and study the text and prayerfully discern where God may be leading us and how God may be using that particular text in that

particular moment to speak to the congregation. Preaching during a pandemic is like other things—it is becoming increasingly difficult. As pastors, we so enjoy being with you all on Sunday morning, preaching as a part of the worship of God—preaching to people. Preaching to a camera can be well, a bit lonely and somewhat depressing. And as weeks turn to months and months are quickly turning into a year, it is another constant reminder that things we take for granted can change in the blink of an eye.

Early in the week I muttered a prayer to God. Something like: “please let there be another sermon in me!” I then turned to this week’s scriptures and I am just going to be completely honest with you all this morning. I was little bit frustrated—really I was more than a little bit frustrated. Today is Baptism of the Lord Sunday. It is the Sunday that falls immediately after the Epiphany and is the day we celebrate and remember Jesus’ baptism. And thus, we celebrate and remember our baptisms. Baptism of the Lord lends itself to numerous sermons about baptism, identity, calling, the Spirit and community. In keeping with my theme of honesty, I wrestled with ideas about ignoring the day all together:

~ I could find something else to preach on (would now be a good time to mention that I began writing several pages of another sermon that I ended up discarding?)

~ I could just fake it til I make it (not suggested by the way...and so not me!)

~and if I did decide to use any of the days’ text, at the very least—I could definitely avoid talking about baptism!

But like a shadow, it kept creeping up on my no matter where I turned. When I decided to simply use the

Genesis text on creation, the water was still there—a constant beckoning to talk about baptism. Of course, when you consider that the Holy Spirit is featured prominently in the baptism of Jesus, I shouldn't have been surprised. The Holy Spirit is tricky like that sometimes—sneaking in, nudging, beckoning, making us uncomfortable. But I still wasn't convinced. I think Monday night I said—scratch that—I'm picking a completely unrelated text. But then I opened my big mouth and I complained to David:

“I just can't preach on the lectionary texts this week. They are on Jesus' baptism. Baptism is such a communal ritual. And quite frankly, I can't do it when we have at least a half dozen baptisms within the confirmation class that have been delayed because of the pandemic and then I start thinking about confirmation and well... It upsets me and makes me frustrated and sad.”

To which he calmly said: “Sounds like you have a lot to say...” And I muttered to myself—“or a lot not to say!” I think that was when I tossed my hands up and said, “fine—I will talk about baptism.” But at that moment I still stubbornly thought it doesn't mean I have to be happy about it.

I wish I could say that settled things and then I had my own epiphany moment which made everything clear or at least ok. But, that is simply not the case. I am frustrated and sad. I mourn the fact that we are not gathered together this morning remembering and rejoicing in our own baptisms as a gathered worshipping community. How I wish I could be looking you all in the eye as we are reminded that we are all called by God, by name—we are all God's beloved children, incorporated into a life with Christ. It saddens me that we have had to delay baptisms this year. But, a baptism with gloves and

a mask? 6 feet apart? —do you sub the water for hand sanitizer?

All joking aside, it really is a serious matter. I know some churches are doing virtual baptisms, but the whole concept of a virtual baptism just doesn't sit well with me especially within the context of confirmation. As a sacrament, we Presbyterians see Baptism as part of the worship service of the gathered community. Unlike other denominations, we do not hold private baptisms or christening services. They are done within the larger context of the gathered congregation.

In the *Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church (USA) there is a phrase about baptism that for some reason has always been embedded in my memory ever since I had to take my ordination exams to become a minister: We are to baptize “without undue haste or undue delay.” That line has always popped up in my mind as I talked to people about baptism or planning them—making sure people understood what baptism is all about. I have always taken that particular part of my calling seriously. There was always time; things were always planned well.

It was also a way that we could make sure people weren't just showing up for an “empty” baptism only to baptize and never return again. Baptism is a sign of entrance into a community and if the baptized was a child, a promise for the church to raise that child and teach him or her the faith. We promise to be the Sunday School teachers, the mentors, the youth leaders; we promise to pray for and support and guide—to travel along the path of life with each other. The session approved the baptism, the family chose a date that allowed others from outside the church community to be present, meaningful hymns to the family were selected. I

always felt we planned baptisms within the bounds of “without undue haste or undue delay.”

Before now, the only time the true importance of the message in that line really came into play with me was in the hospital setting with a dying child—the “undue delay” part finally made sense. As Presbyterians we do not believe in emergency baptisms or that baptism is required for salvation, but in this instance, time was of the utmost importance; baptism was an act of pastoral care proclaiming that child’s identity as a precious child of God, loved, embraced and welcomed home.

Here now, I am finding myself repeating that line about “undue haste and undue delay” again and again this year. When all is said and done, the baptisms and confirmation for our confirmation class will probably be delayed by a year which I could have never imagined. Undue delay and undue haste are echoing in my mind... Though I still stand by our decisions, I never in my wildest dreams thought it would be this delayed.

As I said to the confirmands and their families a few months ago, we baptize and confirm within a community. We will do this. And it will happen. But, I would rather do it well than do it hastily. When so much of our young people’s lives have had to become virtual, I am holding onto the hope that their confirmation or baptism doesn’t have to be. I think it is important for them, for all of us, to be together—to embody the community—to be a visible example of what the body of Christ looks like.

When we make promises in baptism, it transcends the space and time we are physically in. We make promises for people who have gone before and for people who are currently a part of a church somewhere else. So, whether we are able to baptize and confirm in person in

the sanctuary as we all hope or if we have to do it outside when the weather is better, we will figure it out—without any more undue delay! And we will celebrate with joy the fact that we are all God's beloved children loved and forgiven *all the time*.

Our scripture readings remind us of all of this. Our first reading today is the very first few verses of the Bible. In the beginning was God. God was the beginning. And God creates. God's breath, or Spirit, swept over the face of the water. And there was light and God called the light good and the light was different from the darkness. We know that as the story continues, God creates and God calls good. God creates people. God creates you and me. God calls us to the Light. When we touch the waters of baptism, we are reminded of the beginning—both our beginning and the beginning of creation. The beginning when God chose to create—to invite us to life—to invite us to become children of the light. We are connected to the story of creation, to the redemption of God's people and reminded of God's gracious covenant sealed in the promises of Christ.

And then, in our Gospel reading we are given the story of Jesus' baptism. Jesus is in the water and the heavens are torn apart, the dove descends and a voice from heaven cries out: "You are my son the beloved; with you I am well pleased." God is there moving over the water. God's spirit descends. The light has come.

In our baptisms, too, God cries out: you are my child; my beloved. You are good. In our baptisms, we are invited to live into the light. Baptism is a gift of grace and a call to live into that grace. Ultimately, all of these things point to love. They point to the love our God has for creation and for all of us. We just celebrated that Love coming down at Christmastime and we proclaim that Love is here once again to show us the way. That

Love is unstoppable and everlasting. And that Love was never shown more clearly than in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Our baptisms are a visible reminder, a sign and a seal, of that love. When we can celebrate the baptisms that have been delayed due to the pandemic, we will do so with such joy—it is truly something to look forward to with hope. And I know the Spirit will be there moving over the waters and singing with joy and welcome reminding us again of the eternal covenant of love.

Just like in the creation story, we may feel like we are living in the face of the deep. We are living in turbulent times; churning like angry waters. God is there bringing healing through and over the waters. God's breath is there, moving over and throughout those places proclaiming: let there be light!

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Responding to God's Word

Affirmation of Faith from A Brief Statement of Faith

We trust in God, whom Jesus called Abba, Father. In sovereign love God created the world good and makes everyone equally in God's image male and female, of every race and people, to live as one community. But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator. Ignoring God's commandments, we violate the image of God in others and ourselves, accept lies as truth, exploit neighbor and nature, and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care. We deserve God's condemnation. Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation. In everlasting love,

the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people to bless all families of the earth. Hearing their cry, God delivered the children of Israel from the house of bondage. Loving us still, God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant. Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still. With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Prayers of the People and the Lord's Prayer

Let us pray to the Lord: I will say: Give strength, O Lord. I invite you to respond with **bless us with **pe**ace.**

All-glorious God, maker of heaven and earth, hear us as we pray: Give strength, O Lord, and **bless us with **pe**ace.**

**We pray for the world you have made....
Move again over these troubled waters...
Where carelessness and violence bring chaos
restore order, goodness, and life.
We pray for your guidance as we grapple with
events of this week. Help make us instruments of
your peace, love and justice in this tumultuous time.
Give strength, O Lord, and **ble**ss us with **pe**ace.**

**We pray for the church you have redeemed....
Renew us in the gifts of your Spirit and the call to
Christian discipleship. Where history and heresy
have divided us, make us one in you.
Give strength, O Lord, and **ble**ss us with **pe**ace.**

**We pray for the peoples you have created....
Give to the leaders of all nations the wisdom to**

know what is good. Where people are poor and hungry provide justice and daily bread.
Give strength, O Lord, and **bless us with peace.**

We pray for the loved ones you have given us....
Bless our families, friends, and neighbors; keep them safe from trouble and danger. Where there is sorrow, sickness, or suffering send your Spirit of comfort and healing. Give strength, O Lord, and **bless us with peace.**

We pray, too, for those who will be baptized and confirmed especially within our church family once it is safe to do so. Be with them and all of us to remember that we are your precious children; part of your good creation. Give strength, O Lord, and **bless us with peace.**

All this we pray in the name of the Lord Jesus, whose voice is our strength and salvation, whose breath is the Spirit of peace and who taught us to pray:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Sending of God's Word

Closing Hymn: *Arise, Your Light is Come!* #744

Benediction

Beloved children of God: all the blessings of heaven are yours. Alleluia! Go in peace.