

SERMON: Before and After  
TEXT: Mark 1:4-11

1-10-21

Astounded. Appalled. Angry. Anxious. These are just a few words to describe how many of us are feeling after the horrific insurrection at the Capitol building in Washington, DC. What has happened to our country? How did we get to this place?

It was the day of Epiphany. The day commemorating the arrival of the Wise Men in Bethlehem. The day celebrating that magnificent light that shone over all the world, revealing that Jesus is the Savior of all nations, all people. Yet January 6, 2021 will go down as one of the darkest days in the history of our country.

In our outrage, we point our fingers. We are the self-appointed judge and jury. We all feel complete confidence in our definition of right and wrong. Truth and lies. Good guys and bad guys. We all have our theories about what has led to this, and our answers as to how it should end.

I include myself when I use the word “we.” I am acutely aware - more than ever - of how powerful words can be. And I have been in prayer over the words of this sermon more than any other in 26 years of preaching.

You may argue that this is political and should not be spoken of from the pulpit. But I feel compelled by my calling to say that there is no point in reading the Bible or in claiming that we are followers of Christ if we refuse to apply his teachings to every aspect of our lives, both personal and public. At work, at home, at school. 24-7-365. When the banners of white supremacy and “Jesus is my Savior” fly amidst a violent mob, the church must not remain silent.

When I look in the mirror, I feel as though I’m complicit in the deep divisions and the brokenness of our nation. I - and we - have chosen sides. We’ve had terrible thoughts or said terrible things about people on the other side. Perhaps we have been silent when we should have spoken. Perhaps we can be accused of wrong action or inaction. Without a doubt, we are guilty of failing to learn from history. The unacknowledged mistakes of the past will color our future.

It occurred to me in reading the story of Jesus’ baptism that there are several instances that could be placed in the categories of BEFORE AND AFTER. We’ve all seen the before and after photos from makeovers of all kinds: hair and makeup, home remodeling, landscaping. And they show the photos side by side, so that everyone can see and applaud the shocking and beautiful transformation that has taken place.

Right off the bat in the Gospel of Mark we have the BEFORE: “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.” John came BEFORE Jesus.

Too often, those of us who have heard or read these stories dozens of times, skim quickly past John the Baptist. We know Jesus is coming, and we’re eager to get to that part of the story. So, let’s slow down for a moment and look at what’s happening here.

John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness. Now, Mark is the shortest of the four gospels, because Mark is very frugal with details. If he includes a description of a person or a place, you know it’s not just for dressing up the story; it means something. Here it is important for us to know that John is in the wilderness because it tells us who else is likely to be there.

One contemporary theologian explained, “... when Jesus first shows up on the scene, he does not appear where we might have expected — not in Jerusalem,

in the holy city, in the temple, the holy place, [or] in the company of holy people. Rather he shows up in the wilderness and submits to John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, which places him alongside sinners and broken people. He is baptized in solidarity with them..." (Roger Gench, *Baptism of the Lord, Looking Into the Lectionary*, The Presbyterian Outlook, January 10, 2021)

We also think we already know what John is doing. We've made it part of his name, after all; he's John the Baptizer. But John is proclaiming "a baptism of repentance." Those who come for a baptism of repentance aren't looking for cute baby pictures to add to their photo album. If you sign up for a baptism of repentance it means that you recognize your own sin.

Well, supposedly. Certainly there are some people who go through the motions of such a ritual because it "looks good" or because it's "expected" or because "everybody else is doing it." But John has made it clear that confession comes BEFORE repentance, which comes BEFORE forgiveness.

Confession: "I made a mistake. I was wrong. I am at fault." Repentance: "I need to change my behavior. I intend to do better. I will take a new path going forward."

One translation of the Bible called, *The Voice*, emphasizes the brokenness of the people who came to John to be baptized. They “confessed that they were deeply flawed and needed help.” But the kind of baptism that most of us are accustomed to is a celebration, almost antithetical to the idea that we need baptism because we are so deeply flawed.

If you were baptized as an infant or a young person, it’s not likely that you remember it as a moment of confession and repentance. Nor was it a great transformation or turning point in your life. Naturally, we fully embrace the idea of becoming a child of God and we eagerly claim the gift of forgiveness. But whatever we confess or repent from seems to be forgotten as soon as the words pass our lips or left out of the narrative completely.

I watched some of the speeches given on the Senate floor on Wednesday evening when they reconvened to complete the certification of the election. There was very little recognition of any complicity with the attack on the Capitol. Few were willing to take any responsibility whatsoever for the actions of the mob outside. All were quick to condemn the violence, of course. But though they had hours in lockdown to ponder the meaning of the event, it clearly didn’t sink in deep

enough to prick their conscience. Few allowed it to change their minds, their behavior, or their path forward. They brushed past it with the ease of those all-too-familiar words that flow so easily off our tongues. “Thoughts and prayers.”

If what came BEFORE doesn't change what comes AFTER, then repentance has not happened. If there is no real transformation or change of heart, then baptism is for nought.

Jesus was baptized by John, not because he needed to be cleansed of any flaws or errors in judgment, but to be present with truly broken and hurting people who genuinely wanted to change their ways. We are a deeply flawed and truly broken nation. We all need to confess and repent. We need to turn away from evil and turn toward Christ.

AFTER Jesus was baptized, as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens *torn apart*. This is more than just the clouds moving away and the sun shining through after a storm. The heavens were torn apart. And then the Spirit descended and Jesus began his ministry on earth.

Beloved and baptized people of God, we have work to do. Let us pray that the heavens would be torn open once again. That we would hear God's voice. That God's Spirit would descend upon all people of this nation. That we would return to God in true humility. That we would recognize and confess our sins. That we would turn away from evil and turn towards Christ.

May we know the presence of God among us. May the amazing grace and steadfast love of God strengthen and renew us. May God cleanse us, heal us, transform us, change our hearts, and change our lives. May God infuse us with love, hope, and peace.

Christ was born for us. Christ died for us. Christ will come again for us. Christ was, is, and always will be the light that shines in the darkness. May his light shine through us, and may the darkness never overcome it.

To the glory of God.

AMEN.