



Rev. Emily Williams Guffey, Rector
The First Sunday after the Epiphany:
The Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord
January 10, 2021
Mark 1:4-11

In the Gospel that we have just heard, as Jesus is being baptized by John and is coming up from the waters, the sky (and let's imagine that leaden gray winter sky with which we Michiganders are so familiar) opens. The impenetrable steel clouds part, the radiance beams to his holy face, the Spirit warms him, and the Voice speaks to him - the Word made flesh - "You are my Son. You are of Love. And I love you."

When we let ourselves imagine it, the scene is shocking and unprecedented--the heavens torn apart! the sun actually comes out! --and yet the underlying, or overarching, reality that God is Love and Jesus is Love incarnate is so true, and has always been the firm foundation, that we need not be surprised. We witness in this inflection point the love of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, the love of God for all creation, the love of God - so deep, so broad, so high - for you and for me, for those we know and those don't know, for those we agree with and don't agree with, for those who have come before and those who are yet unborn. This love. This is the truth. This is the foundation of our lives.

As one commentator points out, "The heavens will open again in Mark. There will again be talk of tearing, and of Elijah, and of the love between Father and Son. It happens at the [highest inflection point] of Mark's story, in the transfiguration [on the mount]. And it happens again near the end, at the cross, when even the imperial powers get caught up in declarations of divine love"¹ when Jesus cannot breathe, and *with a loud cry, breathes his last. The curtain of the temple is torn in two, and the official guard, who had been standing in front of Jesus, says, "Surely, this man was the Son of God!"*²

Surely he was. We witness this at his baptism, when the barrier between earth and heaven is so effaced, there is only Love being born and born anew; only Love, the Way of challenge, hope, grace, and abundant, eternal life.

Yet, on the days that come after, the ordinary time in between the opening of heaven and the tearing of the temple, "the disciples stumble along, [famously] forgetting what they have seen

¹ Smith, Ted A. "Mark 1:4-11, Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 1*, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, p. 241.

² Mark 15:37-38

and heard.”³ On those ordinary days, indistinguishable, one to the next, like years of Blursdays, “the heavens seem not torn open, but sealed and silent.”⁴ Today, under these unabating leaden skies and persistent isolation and terrible news, do we remember what we have seen and heard in Jesus Christ? Do we have faith even in what we have not yet seen, in what, these days, might barely imagine: justice, joy? Do we feel our dreams of safety, wholeness, and yes, even love deferred (if not crushed, coolly) by such virulent white supremacy as we witnessed on full repugnant display this past Wednesday in Washington, DC?

In the wake of the riots at the U.S. Capitol this past Wednesday, where do we go? Where do we go from here, wrote Martin Luther King, Jr. in his last book, chaos or community? And for more on this, I direct you to Presiding Bishop Michael Curry’s homily for this weekend.

Before I get too far along the way, let me be clear: whenever I use the phrase “white supremacy”, I definitely am not saying that all white people are white supremacists, or racists. I realize that the words “supremacy” and “racism” may be heard as charged words.

They *are* charged, because of the violence (physical, emotional, and spiritual) that occurs when one group of people--generally, in these United States, those of us whose skin is white or who identify as white--assume, wittingly or not, consciously or not, that we are dominant: that when we walk into a room, we’ll be heard; when we speak, we will be believed; when we strive, we will achieve; when we work, we will earn wealth; when we shop, we will shop; when we drive, we will not be stopped; when we fail, we’ll suffer consequences merely proportional to the mistake itself. This is the system of racism, specifically white supremacy, into which we have been born and in which we find ourselves in the United States of America. This is the foundation upon which our beloved country is built: from the stealing of the land in the first place from the indigenous peoples, to the erection of wealth at the expense of Black bodies.

And because we, because I, have been born into it and conditioned to it daily--like those adages of the fish being thirsty but not even realizing it’s in water, or the sun being behind the clouds but still shining!--I have had to, and will always need to, learn to see and practice seeing my privilege: the protections and passes I inherit for having been born into white skin, in this system that prioritizes such visages, yet endangers those whose complexions are darker.

Sometimes, to me, white privilege is as imperceptible as a virus cell. Sometimes, like this past Wednesday, it is on full, repugnant, menacing display. This past Wednesday afternoon, the doors and windows of our Capitol, a sacred space not for religion or ideology but democracy, were bashed, torn open. Hundreds of people with skin the shade of mine tore open and violated the Capitol and our very democratic process. Carrying banners, holding signs, wearing shirts chillingly in support of slavery and Nazism, destroying furniture, debasing the property, employing violence--and walking away. Yes, there are arrests now being made, but we know that if those rioters had had darker complexions...I cannot even finish the thought.

³ Smith, p. 241

⁴ Ibid.

This ghastly display of white privilege and supremacy was shocking, and unprecedented in that holy space, during a constitutional process...shocking and unprecedented and yet not surprising, for it showed, among other things, what we already know to be true: that the laws of this country are made and enforced to uphold whiteness, at devastating and dangerous costs.

Do we remember, even today, even in the midst of horror and sorrow and fatigue and grief, to set our feet on the Way of Love? For as the spiritual goes, which we'll hear Calebria sing in just a few minutes, even as images of the bashing of Capitol doors take hold of our imaginations, "Somebody's knockin' at your door."

*Somebody's knockin' at your door.
Do you hear him? Sounds like Jesus.
Jesus is calling you, and is calling me,
to the Way of Love.*

For the love of God for us, and the Love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the undivided Trinity, is the ultimate truth, our foundation. The love that Jesus shows us is a long road; it is not easy; it is not "one and done"; it is full, yet never complete.

I hold close the maxim that I have discussed before, that "Love is curiosity plus time." Yes, and love is listening, plus time. Love is humility, plus time.

*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others; it is not self-seeking; it is not easily angered; it does not hold onto wrongs.*⁵

Love does not rationalize, ignore, or conspire. Love does not grasp for power, it does not hoard privilege, it does not trample life. Love does not fear.

Love respects and upholds the precious dignity of every human being.⁶ Love reckons, love repents--and if we confess in our heart of hearts that we feel afraid of our differences, we feel awkward and unsure because we don't know what to say or not to say, so we'd rather just look away, that is when we train our eyes to look and look again.

The author Beth-Sarah Wright says that to respect is to "look and look again."⁷ She breaks down the word itself: *spect* meaning "look", as in "spectacle" and *re* meaning "again". Thus, to respect another is to look, and to look again, and to keep looking and to know that love is there, whether we can feel it or not.

Love embraces, yet is not comfortable. Love challenges, it chisels, it carves room for all to be safe and to flourish. *Love does not delight in evil* - it detests evil - but *rejoices in the truth*.⁸

And the truth is that, in many ways, America has been born in white supremacy: a brutal insistence upon the superiority of whiteness above all.

Why rejoice in that?

⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:4-5

⁶ The Baptismal Covenant, *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 305

⁷ "A Conversation on Respect and Dignity with Special Guest Dr. Beth-Sarah Wright", *A Brave Space with Dr. Catherine Meeks* podcast episode, July 15, 2020: <https://abravespace.buzzsprout.com/539101/4581803-a-conversation-on-respect-and-dignity-with-special-guest-dr-beth-sarah-wright>

⁸ 1 Corinthians 13:6

Because *love never ends!*⁹ *Love always hopes. Love always perseveres.*¹⁰ In love there is no such thing as white comfort at the expense of Black life. In love there is no white violence against Black bodies. In love there is no white privilege, nor white supremacy, for no one is superior over and against another. There is no slave, nor master; no rich, nor poor; no Democrat, nor Republican; no American, African, Russian, Canadian, Bolivian...but all are one in Christ, who saves us and sets us free, one and all, to love.
Somebody's knockin' at your door.
Do you hear him?

⁹ 1 Corinthians 13:8

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 13:7