

Sermon for 10 January 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore, Md.
First Sunday after Epiphany/Baptism of the Lord
Scriptures: Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11
“Let’s talk about it.”

Today I feel like thanking God for our country.

Maybe I’d do better to say, thanking God for God’s faith in our country.

Like the man today’s Gospel lesson focuses on, “I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong” of the sandals of “the one who is coming after me.”

I’m speaking for us, not just for myself. The beauty of our message as believers is witness, not achievement.

Do you hear that, church?

Everybody can do what we do. Everything does what we do. Everything and everybody testifies to the glory of God; to the gift in everything and everybody to celebrate, and demonstrate, and elaborate, and expand on the wonderful love of God. That’s who Jesus is: God’s literal, up-close and personal evidence of love in action.

Genesis 1 says everything started out good not from our efforts, but because that’s the point. Everything is good.

Psalm 29 echoes this, saying we’re made to see this ... this is the fundamental truth about everything.

And I want to say that, in church, for the world, and to our nation, this first Sunday after Epiphany and the coming of the wise ones from afar to see and confirm it in Jesus Christ.

What we have to be shaken with today, this particular American January day, is how stable and steady and confirmed this is in our political environment.

People voting on their own two feet, using a government given to them by generations of citizens working together, honoring each other’s choices, triumphed over foolishness and lies. We didn’t do this with guns. We didn’t even do it with money. We did this with honor and cooperation, as we can do, as we are created to do, by loads of history and gallons of currently available custom and effort.

The scripture dances around this matter of John baptizing Jesus in a number of ways. Sometimes he’s clearly recognized; sometimes he recognizes himself for what seems like the first time; sometimes he’s out in the crowd, still unrecognized...That’s all part of the mystery and the ordinariness of God’s presence among us. Once again, there’s no clear divide between

us and God in the scripture. Jesus is one of us, and God is Jesus, and we work wonders, and God produces wonders through our trusting God, and our trust comes from God...

And this all happened again among us, this past week.

Politics is the word this Sunday. We are not just private citizens. We are people with power and developed skills and survival capacities beyond anything in the past ... and we have voted and honored and completed something better than we deserve or could produce on our own.

In our class meeting/Bible study last Thursday evening, we pondered the connection between the act of baptism and the receiving of the Holy Spirit. Why do we say the Holy Spirit comes when we're baptized, and yet some Christians teach that baptism needs to be understood to "take," and others baptize infants. We said .. or I concluded, for the Methodists, since we only had one hour to discuss it, that the early church took awhile to work out a common viewpoint, and as often happens, God allowed it to work in more than one way, and now, pretty much, we don't fight over that. Being able to talk with God, to be guided and healed and comforted by God, all those things we credit the Holy Spirit with ... all this works, happens, lasts, comes and goes, because God is with us, everywhere, all the time, before our time, and past all time...

We will walk with Jesus through our version of the renewal of baptism in a few moments. Listen to the ways we tie it to everything that matters, scripture by scripture and gesture by gesture.

Recognize with me that we are telling one another in a special way this time that there's nothing to worry about, complicated as things are and will be next week. We have work to do. We can't do it alone. God is with us. Being together is fundamental. But this is a great day. Even with Christ hidden in the crowd, even in the uncertainty within our own hearts about what happens next, even as we go through the motions glad for the written directions in our liturgy, we stand on solid ground.

We do this, as we do Christmas and Easter and all the other services, not because we've worked it all out. We do it because we know enough about love to practice it in this simple and familiar way, and we commit to keep on practicing it, through the presence of God in our midst.

This is a good day. Thanks be to God. Amen.