

Baptism — Rev. Denise Stone

Text: Mark 1:4-11

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH BIG FLATS NY, 01-10-2021

⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ 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. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ 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. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."ⁱ

The Word of the Lord, Thanks Be to God

First they came for the Communists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Communist

Then they came for the Socialists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Socialist

Then they came for the trade unionists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a trade unionist

Then they came for the Jews
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Jew

Then they came for me
And there was no one left
To speak out for me

This is a paraphrase from German Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller, who, in response to the atrocities of the Holocaust, spoke these words in January, 1946.

Between the increasing number of deaths each day due to COVID-19 and the incredulous, treasonous actions of a thousand or so people on Wednesday – on Epiphany – I found myself struggling with today's Sermon.

- Can I make a connection with recent events with the *Baptism of the Lord Sunday*?
- Or do I ignore recent events and safely preach on John in the wilderness baptizing people for the repentance of sins?
- What if I upset my congregation, the people I love and care for?
- How do I (how do we) hear God's word in a way that speaks to the realities with which we find ourselves dealing?

- How do we ensure that we are not blinded by patriotic ideologies and risk repeating the mistakes churches made in the 1940s?

These are all questions I asked myself this week.

At the end of the day, I had to decide if God called me to ministry to simply offer comfort *or* if God called me to preach his word, both God's words of comfort **as well as God's words of justice**. It is with all this on my mind that I bring you today's message.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Nazi-era Pastor who was ultimately murdered in a concentration camp for his words and actions. Pastor Bonhoeffer was murdered for standing up to the Nazi regime and specifically for standing against the Nazi influence on, and infiltration of, the church in Germany.

This week, one colleague asked if we, fellow pastors, should look at this hour as our own personal "Bonhoeffer" Moment?

One of Pastor Bonhoeffer most famous quotes is,

"Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession.... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."
— Dietrich Bonhoeffer (*The Cost of Discipleship*)ⁱⁱ

It is against this backdrop that I bring to you another of Bonhoeffer's quotes:

Christianity stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence, arbitrariness and pride of power and with its plea for the weak. Christians are doing too little to make these points clear rather than too much.

Christendom adjusts itself far too easily to the worship of power. Christians should give more offense, shock the world far more, than they are doing now. Christians should take a stronger stand in favor of the weak rather than considering first the possible right of the strong.ⁱⁱⁱ

What does Bonhoeffer and the events of this week have to do with our celebration of the Baptism of the Lord Sunday?

I would ask you to consider the vows you made (or your parents on your behalf) when you were baptized – these specific vows are taken from The Presbyterian Book of Common Worship:

I ask you, therefore, once again to reject sin, to profess your faith in Christ Jesus, and to confess the faith of the church, the faith in which we were baptized.

1 Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world? **I do.**

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love? **I do.**

Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love? **I will, with God's help.**

2 Do you renounce all evil, and powers in the world which defy God's righteousness and love? **I renounce them.**

Do you renounce the ways of sin that separate you from the love of God? **I renounce them.**

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior? **I do.**

Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love, to your life's end? **I will, with God's help.**

3 Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world? **I do.**

Who is your Lord and Savior? **Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.**

Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love? **I will, with God's help.**

Again, you may ask what all of this has to do with Bonhoeffer, the events of this week and Jesus' Baptism?

When you are baptized into the Faith of Jesus Christ, you decide to be a follower of Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone.

I have been incredibly careful over my years in ministry to not allow my personal political views to come out in the pulpit. I have preached the Gospel as found in the Bible and given to us

by Jesus Christ, allowing you to make any applicable connections to political realities for yourselves. This decision is likely more related to my desire to avoid conflict than it is of the ministry to which God has called me.

On Wednesday, when I saw symbols of Christianity alongside confederate flags and a shirt promoting Auschwitz, all in the middle of ***an incited*** insurrection against our nation's government, I was sickened.

More than sickened, I was disgusted when it became abundantly clear that some people who claim to be Christian, were acting in all manners of ways that were not and cannot ever be considered Christian.

That was and this is my Bonhoeffer moment.

In the words of Jeremiah 20:9, I must speak, I must be true to the call God has of me.

If I say, "I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name,"
then within me there is something like a burning fire
shut up in my bones;
I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot.

We, you and me, we cannot allow the cross of Jesus Christ to be wrapped in an American Flag and call the worship of American patriotism Christianity.

Hear that again.

We, you and me, we cannot allow the cross of Jesus Christ to be wrapped in an American Flag and call the worship of American patriotism Christianity.

Inciting, encouraging violence, advertising symbols of black slavery, wearing pictures of WWII concentration camps **does not** represent Christianity.

Neo-nazi's and white supremacists and QAnon conspiracy theorists do **not** represent Christianity.

These groups, and others like them, represent a skewed, uneducated, self-serving religion that has nothing to do with Christianity. Those beliefs and practices give them the opportunity to disguise their hatred and prejudices against people who do not look or believe like them under a cloak of religion.

I have sat by quietly for far too long, speaking only in vague allusions, and have not directly called out this false religion of American Patriotic Christianity.

Today, I am calling it out.

In today's scripture, Jesus was baptized by John in the River Jordan. John's Baptism for all that came to him, except Jesus, was a baptism of Repentance. It was a baptism symbolizing that the person being baptized was ready for the inbreaking of God's Kingdom. John identified the inbreaking of God's Kingdom coming in the person of Jesus Christ.

As we state in our Baptismal Vows, when we proclaim our faith in Jesus Christ, we commit

- to turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world.
- to turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love
- to be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love
- to renounce all evil, and powers in the world which defy God's righteousness and love
- to renounce the ways of sin that separate you from the love of God
- to commit to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior
- to be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love, to your life's end
- to turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world.

Did you notice that?

The first, fourth and last vow in this list are essentially the same.

To renounce all evil, and powers in the world which defy God's righteousness and love.

This past week we saw in a rare display the evil that comes from the power in the world.

Five people died because of the actions of a few. Those actions were cheered on by some and not repudiated by near enough.

I am calling it out.

We are called to renounce all evil, and powers in the world which defy God's righteousness and love.

What I **am** called to do by God, and what, as a disciple of Christ that I will do, is tell you what it means to be a Christian.

Being a Christian is no more and no less than being a follower of Jesus Christ.

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Being a follower of Jesus Christ means that you strive to live your life in the manner in which Jesus lived his life and in accordance with the teachings of Jesus Christ and in accordance with the words from God as found in Scripture.

Jesus came, in the words of Isaiah chapter 61,

To bring good news to the poor,
To heal the broken-hearted,
To announce release to captives
And freedom to those in prison.

Anything less than this, is not Christianity.

Anything contrary to this, is not Christianity.

When will we call out this false religion of American Patriotic Christianity?

For me, that day is today.

When will we renew our baptismal vows and reclaim and live out an authentic faith in Jesus Christ?

For me, that day is today.

As I close today's sermon, I want to share with you the words that were written on Wednesday by our Synod's Acting Leader and Stated Clerk, Rev. Nancy Talbot.

We are both horrified and saddened by the violence and the blatant challenge to our democracy that we have seen at the Capitol today, this day that Christians celebrate as Epiphany. The story of Jesus' birth and the story of Epiphany reminds us that for generations, too many to count, there have always been people who are willing to destroy in order to try and hold on to what they believe to be their birthright. We must stand for another vision. As Christians, we follow the Prince of Peace who came not with a sword but with a message of justice and human and spiritual transformation.

Every chance Jesus had he reminded people to choose the way of God over the way of Empire. As the Spirit of the Lord was upon Jesus, let that Spirit be upon us so that we proclaim good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind and that we set the oppressed free. Scripture on this day of Epiphany from Matthew 2: 10-12 tells us, "When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and

they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.” Let us leave this day by another road with renewed commitment to follow the Prince of Peace and the ways he taught us to live in the world. Let us choose the road that leads to justice, peace, and obedience to God’s call.^{iv}

“Let us leave this day by another road with renewed commitment to follow the Prince of Peace and the ways he taught us to live in the world. Let us choose the road that leads to justice, peace, and obedience to God’s call.”

Hear this prayer,

Oh God, forgive us for being timid with our faith in Jesus.

Forgive us for allowing love of country to supersede or to replace love of You.

Forgive us for failing to speak out against bigotry, hatred and injustice when we have the opportunity.

Forgive us for following political leaders and ideologies rather than your Son.

Help us to speak boldly the words and commit to action the commands of Jesus Christ.

May we, like he, embrace Isaiah 61’s message as our mission:

To bring good news to the poor,
To heal the broken-hearted,
To announce release to captives
And freedom to those in prison.

Amen.

ⁱ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ⁱⁱ <https://tdbi.org/dietrich-bonhoeffer/notable-quotes/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a Sermon on *II Corinthians 12:9*. <http://www.godandculture.com/blog/bonhoeffer-on-christians-and-the-worship-of-power>.

^{iv} <https://mailchi.mp/synodne/epiphany-message-2021?fbclid=IwAR0fBFBAIle-wmuRJsdeLveGlvI44qlaI3Mf2ijAaiFjEPHqPPHrsbPH5dl>.