

Fresh Start – 1. Fresh Start
Mark 1:4-11
December 31, 2023
Pastor Bethany Nelson

Earlier this week, my middle son asked me: *“Mom, tell me again how you named me. I’m named after a king, right?!”* Tell me again, Mom. As you can guess from his question, it’s a story he has heard before. We’ve told him that his name, Josiah, comes from a young King in scripture – who took the throne at only 8 years old, but led his people to love and follow God.

The other boys quickly chime in, and want to know the stories of their names, too. And of course, I love telling them – because we spent many, many months praying for these precious ones of ours, carefully choosing a name that carried our prayers and hopes for them. And my most cherished memories are the day of their birth, when we spoke aloud and revealed their names. It was a holy moment then, to name our children, and to speak this word, declaring who and *whose* they were.

And I think, it is a holy moment still, when they ask about their names. Because what they really are asking us is: *who am I? What is my story?*

Each of us seek belonging, we have a strong desire deep within our core, to be known and to belong to another. We find ourselves grounded in knowing the stories of our ancestors, roots find themselves buried deep within us and give us sure footing as we grow. And some of us, have struggled because we can’t quite place that story – perhaps we don’t know it, or perhaps the storytellers and rememberers in our lives have past... or perhaps, we have tried to break unhealthy systems of generations past, and find ourselves blazing a new way.

We each have a unique story to tell, that likely includes joy and heartache, hopes and broken dreams. But shared among us, is a desire to know our story, and to belong.

Throughout Advent, we heard the origin story of John the Baptist and how he came to be. And then, on Christmas, we heard the story of Jesus, our Messiah, being born. Now today, their paths cross. Some thirty years have passed since that first Christmas in Bethlehem, and now Jesus is a grown man on the verge of beginning his own public ministry. But first, as we’ll hear, he pauses to remember his own story of naming and belonging.

This story of Jesus is told in each of the Synoptic Gospels – which is what we call the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke because their stories share a common view and have many similarities. While they have differing perspectives and audiences, they each tell us the story of Jesus – from his birth, through his ministry, until his death and resurrection.

In all three, Jesus’ ministry begins with his baptism. In Mark’s gospel, it begins like this:

John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. Everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins.” -- Mark 1:4-5

We hear in these verses that crowds of people are flocking to the river to be baptized by John. “All the people of Jerusalem” were there, or so it seemed, because the number was so great. The sun beat warmly upon the river, and John stood in the middle of it preaching and inviting

people to change their lives and be baptized. One after another, people came into the river. Young and old, men and women, widows and children, fishermen, and shepherds.

They felt the longing in their heart to *be known* and to be claimed by God, as their worries and fears, the sins, and brokenness could be washed away... carried away down the river.

I wonder if John's arms were tired from baptizing so many. I wonder if his voice cracked or was stretched thin. I wonder if he was ready for a break. But then, all of a sudden in line, was John's cousin – Jesus. The Son of God, waiting in line to be baptized. The one whom will free us from our sins and brokenness, the one who will restore our hope and our life... this one, the Holy One, waits to be baptized.

As the Gospel of Matthew tells us, John tried to argue with Jesus, saying the *he* doesn't need to be baptized. But like any one of us who have tried to argue with Jesus know, John lost. Because Jesus, who is God-in-flesh is here to live among us, and to experience all of human life. Jesus, too, would be baptized. And no one would stand in his way.

The Gospel of Mark tells us about Jesus baptism, in this way:

About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness." - Mark 1:9-11

The heavens split open and the Holy Spirit descends upon him, and God speaks. In the beginning... God spoke, and the heavens were created. The waters and land, the whole earth was created. In the beginning... God spoke, and every living creature was given life. And called them, God called you: good.

Now on this day, a new creation is birthed. Jesus the Christ, comes from the water. God spoke, and the heavens are opened. God spoke, and the Spirit descends among us. God spoke, and Jesus is named:

"You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."

It takes my breath away. This incredible statement of belonging and love. I remember the day I held each of my children and spoke their names, for the first time out loud. *You are mine*, I said, *whom I dearly love*.

I knew then, that there was *nothing* these little ones could that would ever change my love for them. Then entered their toddler years, and some days they challenged that thinking. And eventually, they will become teenagers and adults who make their own decisions, and sometimes bad ones... and I'm sure they will challenge us again. But no matter what, I'll say: *You are mine, whom I dearly love*.

On this day, as Jesus is baptized, God models and defines this kind of love for all of us. Jesus has done nothing, in way of his public ministry yet. In Mark's gospel, this is the story that introduces us to Jesus.

And so you'll notice what God did *not* say... God did *not* say, "This is my Son, who performs great miracles, or never misses a Sabbath, or preaches really well at the temple." Jesus has a

blank biography thus far, aside from being born. And yet, God calls Jesus beloved. God names Jesus as one who gives God happiness.

And you know what? God feels the same way about YOU. You are God's beloved child, whom God dearly loves. In YOU, God finds happiness. On that great day when you were baptized – whether you were an infant, a teen, or an adult. Whether you remember it, or not, the account of Jesus' baptism was repeated FOR YOU. The heavens opened, the Spirit descended, and God spoke your name: beloved.

It isn't contingent on how "religious" you are, or how "good" you are. It doesn't matter if you can recite one verse of scripture or thousands, or even none at all.

God finds happiness and delight in YOU, because you are God's child. You have been marked by God's grace and healed by God's love.

Now, maybe you have *never* been baptized. And you wonder what that might mean for you. So here from me, two things: (1) We have water, and nothing prevents you from being baptized. So come, and find me after worship, and let's chat. And (2), this is most important: You are *already* God's beloved. You already belong to God, are covered by God's grace and are one who gives God happiness.

God finds happiness and delight in you right now, as you are. God does not place an asterisk next to God's words. God does not say, *You are my child, whom I dearly love, in you I find happiness when...* There is no "when" or "if" just now, right now – as you are, God loves and claims you.

Today is the final day of 2023, and with it – many of us make time to reflect upon the last year. We ask things like: What was a favorite memory? What did we accomplish and do well? When were we afraid, but showed courage? How did we fail?

And many of us, will set resolutions or goals for the coming year. According to Forbes, the three most common New Year's Resolutions are improving: health or fitness, finances, and mental health. Other common ones include traveling, meditating, and performing better at work.

I'll set some goals for the coming year, too. As a family we will set some goals around how we will spend our time, and something we'd like to learn. Luke and I will make some intentions about how we will grow and strengthen our marriage and faith. And I always set a reading goal for the year. All of this is to say: I'm a fan of reflection and setting some goals or intentions. But I'd like to offer you a suggestion as you do: instead of starting the year by setting goals only around improving yourself, as if you are beginning the year in a deficit... start by remembering who you already are: *a beloved child of God, in whom God finds happiness.*

There is nothing you can do, nothing you can improve upon, that will change this. You are, already, God's joy. God's delight.

And so instead, what if we began our new year with a renewed confidence that we are God's. That we are loved. That we are good.

Then from this place, begin. How might you grow in love of God this new year? How might you claim more fully the delight God already finds in you?

Because I don't think God cares very much about goals of self-improvement. But, I think God cares very much about how and who you love. How do you live as one who has been marked by God? How do your words, your actions, your movements reveal God's grace in the world? Does you love those that God loves? Do you comfort the grieving, befriend the lonely,

welcome the outcast, or help those in need? Do you see as God sees, one's in whom God finds happiness and delight?

After Jesus is baptized, each of the synoptic Gospels quickly move into Jesus public ministry. He begins to preach, to call disciples, to teach about God's love, to heal, to feed, to welcome. Jesus does all of this, not as a goal to improve himself, but with the intention of sharing God's love that is already fully within him. To expand and build up the Kingdom of God among us. Across the Wesleyan tradition, and throughout United Methodist Churches around the world, we have a tradition of beginning each year by renewing our covenant with God. It's one way that we practice trusting that we are God's, and asking God to guide us in the year to come.

John Wesley encouraged Methodists to pray a "Covenant Prayer" at the start of each new year, as a way of renewing and remembering their baptism. Bishop Lanette Plambeck, our Bishop of Minnesota and the Dakotas, said this,

"The Covenant prayer helps us remember what this Jesus-way of life looks like and what loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and loving our neighbor as God loves us, is required of us. When we pray this prayer, we remember that we are baptized. [We remember our baptismal promises:] We renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of our sin. We accept the freedom and power God gives to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. We confess Jesus Christ as our Savior, trust wholeheartedly in his grace, and promise to serve Christ as Lord, in union with the church.

We renew our promise to live as faithful members of Christ's church and serve as his representatives in this world. The Covenant Prayer describes missional life devoted to following Jesus and serving as Christ's representative in the world."¹

What does it look like for us, as individuals and as a church family, to begin our year by remembering that we are God's beloved? What does it look like for us to recommit to the three simple rules to doing no harm, doing intentional good, and staying in love with God?

I can't think of a better way to begin a new year fully trusting in God's presence and grace. And so, beloveds, as we close 2023 and welcome a new year, I invite you to pray this Wesley Covenant Prayer with me. As our faith, hope, and voices come together, let us trust that God is with us. God hears us. And God continues to claim us as God's own, saying: "You are my Child, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."

Let us pray:

WESLEY COVENANT PRAYER

I am no longer my own, but thine.

Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee,

Exalted for thee or brought low for thee.

Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God,

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven.
Amen

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of December 31, 2023

Weekly Prayer

Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Thank you God, for sending your Son to live among us. As this new year begins, draw me nearer to you, that I may know and love you more deeply. Guide me to serve you with joy-filled love, every day of my life. Amen.

Monday, January 1

Scripture: Matthew 5:14-16

You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can't be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.

Observation

Happy new year! As we begin 2024, may these words of Jesus offer guidance for the coming year. As we lit candles on Christmas Eve, we celebrated the gift of Jesus who is the light of the world. Today, we remember that Jesus calls all of us to be bearers of this light, shining the love and goodness of God into our world. How is Jesus inviting you to be a light-bearer in 2024?

Application

John Wesley, founder of Methodism, began every year by remembering his baptism and invitation from Jesus to "be the light." This has become a tradition among Methodists, to begin the year in prayer. Today, I invite you to pray the words of Wesley's Covenant Prayer, asking God to guide you in this new year.

Prayer

Wesley Covenant Prayer

I am no longer my own, but thine.
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee,
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things
to thy pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

Tuesday, January 2

Scripture: Mark 1:4-11

John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. Everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins. John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. He announced, "One stronger than I am is coming after me. I'm not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."

Observation

In this passage, we read of Jesus' baptism. It begins with familiar words about John the Baptist, who we've spent time with through Advent, and ends with Jesus being baptized in the Jordan River. God responds to this act with words of love and grace: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."

Application

I find passages where God acts as a loving parent to be quite meaningful. For some of us, these words God spoke to God's own Son are echoed by words we've heard from our own parents. And for some of us, these are words we've only wished we could hear so clearly. But here is the good news: just as God took delight in and "dearly loves" Jesus, so too, does God delight in and dearly love you. You are part of the beautiful family of God. And in your smile, your hopes, your gifts and presence, God finds happiness in you.

Prayer

Loving God, who is as a parent to us all: thank you for your love. Let it wash over me, as a comfort and guide for my life. Help me to live as one marked by you, your "dearly loved" one. Guide my words and actions, to share your love with others, that all might my find comfort and belonging in you. Amen.

Wednesday, January 3

Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11

Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him. After Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was starving. The tempter came to him and said, "Since you are God's Son, command these stones to become bread." Jesus replied, "It's written, *People won't live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God.*" After that the devil brought him into the holy city and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, "Since you are God's Son, throw yourself down; for it is written, *I will command my angels concerning you, and they will take you up in their hands so that you won't hit your foot on a stone.*" Jesus replied, "Again it's written, *Don't test the Lord your God.*" Then the devil brought him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. He said, "I'll give you all these if you bow down and worship me." Jesus responded, "Go away, Satan, because it's written, *You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him.*" The devil left him, and angels came and took care of him.

Observation

After Jesus' baptism, he quickly begins his public ministry. In Matthew's Gospel this begins by his being tempted in the wilderness. The devil tempted Jesus with bread, power, and worldly recognition. Each time, Jesus confesses his faith, cites scripture, and trusts in God.

Application

Not even Jesus is free from temptation. This reminds me that the One who saves us is familiar with being human. Jesus knew what it was to be tested, to want, to grieve, to love. And so however you might feel tested today, or in ways that you feel longing or grief, or lonesome, remember this: you are not alone. God took on flesh, in Jesus, to be with you, and to love you. Christ knows deeply your longings and hopes, your joys and sorrows. And Jesus loves you, continuing to invite you to follow him.

Prayer

Almighty God, you are steadfast, faithful, and true. Turn me toward you, again and again. Make me steadfast, faithful, and true in my love of you. Give me strength today and remind me of your love. Amen.

Thursday, January 4

Scripture: Matthew 4:12-17

Now when Jesus heard that John was arrested, he went to Galilee. He left Nazareth and settled in Capernaum, which lies alongside the sea in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali. This fulfilled what Isaiah the prophet said:

*Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,
alongside the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles,
the people who lived in the dark have seen a great light,
and a light has come upon those who lived in the region and in shadow of death.*

From that time Jesus began to announce, "Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!"

Observation

Like many prophets, John the Baptist's ministry was not without danger or consequence. Today, we read of his arrest and later (Matthew 14) he will be killed. But Jesus does not falter or fear, and continues in his own ministry. As he does, he even shares words that John, himself, had preached: "*change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!*" (V17).

Application

The kingdom of heaven is here! John's work of *preparing the way* has finished, and Jesus is here. The kingdom of God is here. And still, there is more to do: more love to share, more invitations to give, more people to reach. Jesus' ministry has begun. As it does, he grounds himself in the words of the prophet Isaiah, too: "*the people who lived in darkness have seen a great light, and a light has come upon those who lived in the region and in shadow of death*" (v16).

Prayer

Dearest Jesus, light of the world and of my life. Thank you for inviting me to follow you. Help me to know what it is you'll have me do. Give me strength and courage, that like you, I can declare the presence of heaven right now. Amen.

Friday, January 5

Scripture: Matthew 4:18-22

As Jesus walked alongside the Galilee Sea, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew, throwing fishing nets into the sea, because they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," he said, "and I'll show you how to fish for people." Right away, they left their nets and followed him. Continuing on, he saw another set of brothers, James the son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with Zebedee their father repairing their nets. Jesus called them and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Observation

Jesus does not work alone! God has created and called us into community, not only to experience friendship and love, but because it is through relationships and community that we experience and see God at work among us. As we heard at creation, and again at Jesus' baptism, God finds happiness and delight in God's children.

Application

And so today, we read as Jesus calls the first disciples. Those who were first to hear the invitation to "come, follow me." They dropped their nets, they left their familiar lives, and they set out to build up the community of God here on earth. How is Jesus inviting you to create spaces of community and belonging? How is Jesus inviting you to "come, follow me"?

Prayer

Everlasting God, since the beginning of time you have invited your children to follow you, and to live in your love. Thank you for your persistence throughout time, and for loving me so deeply. Help me to make my home in you, Amen.

Saturday, January 6

Scripture: Acts 8:26-39

An angel from the Lord spoke to Philip, "At noon, take the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a desert road.) So he did. Meanwhile, an Ethiopian man was on his way home from Jerusalem, where he had come to worship. He was a eunuch and an official responsible for the entire treasury of Candace. (Candace is the title given to the Ethiopian queen.) He was reading the prophet Isaiah while sitting in his carriage. The Spirit told Philip, "Approach this carriage and stay with it." Running up to the carriage, Philip heard the man reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you really understand what you are reading?" The man replied, "Without someone to guide me, how could I?" Then he invited Philip to climb up and sit with him. This was the passage of scripture he was reading:

*Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent
so he didn't open his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was taken away from him.
Who can tell the story of his descendants
because his life was taken from the earth?*

The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, about whom does the prophet say this? Is he talking about himself or someone else?" Starting with that passage, Philip proclaimed the good news about Jesus to him. As they went down the road, they came to some water. The eunuch said, "Look!

Water! What would keep me from being baptized?" He ordered that the carriage halt. Both Philip and the eunuch went down to the water, where Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Lord's Spirit suddenly took Philip away. The eunuch never saw him again but went on his way rejoicing.

Observation

Throughout Jesus' ministry, he continued to invite people to follow, to grow in faith, and to build of the kingdom of God among them. This is the mission of the church, too. In the story of Acts, we hear about the early church. And today, we meet a man who isn't given a name, known only to us as the Ethiopian Eunuch. His heart, to use Wesley's words, was "strangely warmed" and he found himself *immediately* desiring to be baptized.

Application

"See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" (V37). I've always loved the enthusiasm the man shares in this voice. He is confident and passionate about following Jesus. It reminds me of the line from the movie, *When Harry Met Sally*: "*I came here tonight because when you realize you want to spend the rest of your life with somebody, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible.*" The Eunuch knew then how he wanted to shape his life and wanted that to start as soon as possible. When last did you feel this tug in your heart? Has the story of God in Christ moved you so deeply that you have ever felt such urgency? Perhaps God is inviting you into something new today -- a new friendship or ministry, a new spiritual habit, or a way of serving. And perhaps you'll ask, as the Eunuch, with passion, "*what prevents me?*" Let's start today!

Prayer

Good and loving God, speak to me today, that I might listen. Call me to follow you with urgency and passion, that my whole life and heart is tuned to sing your grace. Give me courage, clarity, confidence, and joy today and always. Amen.