

First Sunday after the Epiphany
Baptism of Jesus
Immanuel United Church

January 10th, 2021

Welcome

Call to Worship:

The God of self-emptying love incarnates in our lives in the fullest
and also as vulnerable and dependent as a baby.

At the child's baptism, God called Jesus God's beloved child and sent God's spirit upon him.

**May we, born of water and of the Spirit,
know ourselves to be beloved by the Creator.**

Let us rejoice in the new life to which God calls us.

Let us worship together. Happy New Year to all.

VU 91 *The First Nowell* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9b_vZ7xJDI

Prayer: (Adapted from the Prayer by Jennifer Henry)

**As we enter into the stories of Magi's visit and Jesus's baptism in our day,
may we decry the tyrants that still rule, expose the forces that still terrorize,
confront the realities that still displace.**

**As we enter into the stories in our day,
may we celebrate the ones who follow their heart, who centre the child,
who defy those who deal in death.**

**May our gifts be passion, commitment, and action for a day
when all children under the star-filled skies might thrive in dignity, safety and possibility.
In the name of the toddler Christ, Amen.**

Reflective Music: The Trumpet Child (by Over the Rhine)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXJObq5rZDQ>

The trumpet child will blow his horn / Will blast the sky till it's reborn
With Gabriel's power and Satchmo's grace / He will surprise the human race
The trumpet he will use to blow / is being fashioned out of fire
The mouthpiece is a glowing coal / The bell a burst of wild desire
The trumpet child will riff on love / Thelonious notes from up above
He'll improvise a kingdom come / Accompanied by a different drum
The trumpet child will banquet here / Until the lost are truly found

A thousand days, a thousand years / Nobody knows for sure how long

The rich forget about their gold...

Scripture: Mark 1:4-11

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. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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.

And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Reflection: To Hear a New Voice

My last church offered monthly services for the residents at the three Seniors' Homes in the neighbourhood: River Park Garden, Vista Park Lodge and Golden Links. So, in April, 2017, just as the ice was melting on the Seine River, I was leading a Senior's Lodge worship at River Park Garden.

When I heard that Joan McGregor, our beloved member, passed away a day after Christmas last year, and she was a resident at Golden Links, I wondered if I had met her; maybe we had sung some old hymns together. (She sang in our Immanuel choir for many years!) I cherish the possibility that we might have known each other, even if I did not immediately know her name.

The services for the senior residents are usually warm and exciting. It depends partly on how you lead it, but it can be a really fun time. You sing songs with people! The songs they love and remember are in frequent rotation! Some doze off in their dreams, but there are always eager singers. People are naturally moved to sing.

That April, just a few months before I moved to Immanuel as your new minister, I was going through a deeply troubling time. The church decided to cut back on their staffing, (I found this out when I came back from holiday in January via an envelope that was placed on my desk.) and I decided to leave rather than demand my full-time position be preserved. I was in shock and insecure. To make it worse, there was no announcement of any vacant ministry

position in the city. I was drained, physically tired and injured in spirit; I felt invalid and inadequate. I had tried to conform to that church's culture since my arrival, and yet, most of the time I actually straddled two worlds - my deeper self and the expectation of the congregation, "Be like us."

On that April morning, when the ice was melting, almost ready to set the river free, I had just finished saying the last benediction and was blowing out the candles when I heard a voice coming from the seating area. Someone was looking at me directly, in the middle aisle. A black woman, small and stooped, was trying to tell me something. She might not have known who I was or even why I was there, but still her attention was poured out, focused only on me and she began to call me, making sure her "still, small" voice reached me: "You will be good. You will be good. YOU WILL BE GOOD." It reached me very effectively as the voice of "opposition" to my thinking in those days that I was not enough, my immersion in a sense of defeat and uncertainty. Then, two staffers came to her and rolled her wheelchair back to her room.

I did not realize what had happened spiritually and what kind of call it was that awakened me, but later, I knew it was an experience of "inner baptism", a blessing from someone who wants you to know and hear a new voice about you! That's baptism - informing you who you truly are in your relationship with the world and with God. To me, that woman was a metaphor for God in terms of who God is and how she engages us and gives us a new voice. And I would definitely say it is what we call Epiphany - - God's choosing the way to reveal the light in the birth and baptism of Jesus, therefore, in the same way, in the rebirth and baptism of ourselves.

The opening words of Genesis, which is the Hebrew Bible passage for this week's lectionary, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth" (v. 1) tells us this: The world before God began to create was dark, without form and void. The world was chaos. The world was deeply troubled. In his essay, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" in "The Souls of Black Folk", W. E. B. Du Bois (an influential African American rights activist during the early 20th century; He became a spokesperson for full and equal rights in every realm of a person's life. He died a day before Martin Luther King Jr.'s Speech "I Have a Dream." He said, "Either America will destroy ignorance, or Ignorance will destroy the United States.") begins with this poem from Arthur Symons.

"O Water, voice of my heart, crying in the sand,
All night long crying with a mournful cry,
As I lie and listen, and cannot understand
The voice of my heart in my side or the voice of the sea,
O water, crying for rest, is it I, is it I?
All night long the water is crying to me.

Unresting water, there shall never be rest
Till the last moon droop and the last tide fail,
And the fire of the end begin to burn in the west;
And the heart shall be weary and wonder and cry like the sea,
All of life crying without avail,
As the water all night long is crying to me.”

The baptism of Jesus is an epiphany, not only in revealing Jesus, but in modelling what should happen to all who are baptized: the epiphany of God’s light and God’s purposes in and about our lives, even now. In Genesis, as well as today’s Gospel story, "John baptizes Jesus" in the River Jordan, the story of God’s creation unfolds and shows how “order” emerges from troubled chaos - from the formless and the void, from the water’s vortex to the order of peace, not of domination.

This week, we’ve seen America shaken as violent White Supremacist Pro-Trump riot stormed Captiol building. We’ve been shaken too.

We need inner baptism now and then for our soul. We need “social baptism” in every occasion we can make in the world to bring about the purposes God has for the peaceable realm in which “Every child under the star-filled skies thrives in dignity, safety and possibility”, in deep equality. Our soul must hope to sing and bring about an epiphany - our growing awareness of God’s purpose in shaping an inclusive and loving world. God gives us “voice”. In the storm of our lives, especially for those who are marginalized — those who are standing between two worlds - our true and whole selves are at odds with ourselves as “seen through” the lens of the dominant world. (W. E. B. Du Bois called this pain and hurt, fatigue and frustration living with “Double Consciousness”.)

Those who choose to stand against the real existence of oppression are standing in the quiet but dangerous eye of the hurricane. The storm still rages, but God speaks to us and through us, especially those who strive to speak and hear a new voice coming out of the “smothering blanket of silence” in the eye!

In today’s Gospel story, John baptizes Jesus. The fresh water from the River Jordan was the same water Hebrew people in ancient times believed was, by its nature, “chaotic.” Water has many of the same characteristics as the souls of the troubled. (show the pictures of Ray Collin’s Seascapes:

<https://mymodernmet.com/ray-collins-wave-photography/?fbclid=IwAR3VmLDjOvXl12gBleleELXn2nsjAvyL7GFLH8j5bUqrnlvC3rVvYJq4UEuo>)

John used water for the people in his society who flowed and fluctuated aimlessly like the sea water. By receiving this baptism, people were invited to the epiphany: God descends upon us like a dove (or a chickadee for

Manitobans - show the video of chickadee landing on people's hands and picking seeds)), and marks us and calls us as a child of God.

In the moment of inner baptism, "the veil of death" that separated us from truly seeing the world as it is and truly seeing ourselves as who we are is lifted, and we are awakened to transformation. I had a hard time accepting what that woman called out, but now I call back joyfully, "I will be good, I will be good, I WILL BE GOOD".

We cannot always see God's purposes, or our potential for transformation when we are not in the position to take heed. And yet it happens. Inner baptism, social baptism, occurs when we strive for it, open to it, seek it, and believe it is possible. Indeed, all things are possible. Therefore, friends, strive hard to stand against the death-dealing power that seeks to erase the meaning and the value of our existence. Be like John who baptized Jesus. Or, be like Jesus who received baptism from John. Both heard a new voice from the Heavens: "You are my Child, the Beloved; With you I am well pleased." God's order of creation always strives to move our human family from chaos to community. As it did in the past, so it does with us now.

VU 89 *From a Distant Home*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJKC2U66tTQ>

Communion:

Invitation to the Table

Blessed are you, God of mercy, Creator of the Universe, who gives us this bread and this wine, the products of your goodness and of the labour of human hands. We offer them to you that they may become for us the food of eternal life and the drink of eternal joy.

Blessed be God, now and forever.

God be with you!

And with all the world!

Lift up your hearts!

We lift them up to our God.

Let us give thanks to our gracious God.

Blessed be the one by whose goodness we live.

Holy are you, O God. Before all that is, you were God.

Outside all we know, you are God. After all is finished, you will be God.

Wholly Love, creative and self-giving, generously moving in all the near and distant corners of the universe,

nothing exists that does not find its source in you. And so we give you thanks.

We remember before you this day the life that Jesus lived.

We remember how he was born to a woman in poverty, in a time of great suffering.

He announced the coming of your reign: a commonwealth, not of domination, but of peace, justice and reconciliation.

He healed the sick and fed the hungry. He forgave sins and set captives free from all manner of powers that would deny life.

He preached and practised unconditional love - **love of neighbour and of enemy alike.**

On the night ...

Send your Spirit among us, O God.

Enliven this bread, awaken this body, pour us out for each other.

Make us, while many, united.

Make us, though broken, whole.

Make us, despite death, alive.

And now we pray to you, O God, in the words of Jesus, your Child: **Our father...**

These are the gifts of God for the people of God. Come, for all is prepared.

Distribution:

Prayer after Communion:

Bread of life, **strengthen us.**

Cup of peace, **nurture us.**

Ancient hope, **encourage us,**

and keep us from resting until we know our world to be transformed. Amen.

Hymn: VU 79 *Arise, Your Light Is Come*

Benediction:

In water **renew us.**

In calling, **affirm us.**

In living, **guide us.**

In proclaiming, **strengthen us.**

In faith, **encourage us.**

In trusting, **love us.**