

On Rioting and The Realm of God
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Based on Mark 1:4-11. John Baptizes Jesus.

Our Lesson this morning takes us to the first century Judean wilderness where John the baptizer has appeared, proclaiming a baptism of changed hearts and minds in order to participate in the realm of God:

And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem are going out to him, and are baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Now John is clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he eats locusts and wild honey. [This image conjures among the people a vision of Elijah, a sign that the realm of God is at hand!]

John the baptizer proclaims, "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 comes from Nazareth of Galilee [redneck hillbilly country ... not at all cultured and educated "like us" here in the nation's capital] and is baptized by John into the Jordan. [The full-bodied, life-altering, nearly-drowning baptism of Jesus into the Jordan makes the baptism of those decent and orderly Judeans merely in the Jordan look like they are splashing around in the kiddie pool.]

And just as Jesus is coming up out of the water, [at the moment his lungs are about to give out,] he sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.

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

Through these words, may we hear a Word of Hope. Amen.

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They call it "the desolating sacrilege." An abomination right in the heart of the most holy building in the nation's capital.

One hundred sixty five years before the time of Jesus, a violent occupying force seizes the Temple in Jerusalem. Strips the sacred altar of its spiritual significance. And instead installs the symbols of imperial domination.

The people are furious. How could this have happened! This is not who we are! We are better than this!

With no small effort the people take back the Temple. Exile the occupiers. Clean up the mess. And restore the sacred spaces to their rightful purpose.

The Jewish celebration of Hanukkah, remembers this restoration. A festival of light shining through the darkness. In the heart of the most holy building in the nation's capital. And the darkness did not overcome it.

One hundred sixty five years later, in the time of John the Baptizer, in the time of Jesus, the sacrilege is back. Morphed into an even more insidious movement.

The power of imperial force is still fomenting throughout the land of promise and plenty. The hold of the people on the Temple is tenuous, at best. Some would argue things have gotten worse. Because now, the Temple leadership has chosen appeasing instead of direct confrontation. Fearing further destruction from that fomenting imperial power, the Temple leadership thinks they can hold it in check if they just don't rock the boat. We will not challenge you, they say to the Herods and to the Caesars, if you just don't hurt US. And down the slippery slope they go, eroding their sacred oath in the process.

John the Baptizer is having none of it.

Appeasing the desolating sacrilege does not make it go away, he insists! It makes it think it is okay.

And it is NOT.

We are just as corrupt as the imperial force, John declares, when fear of "what worse thing it will do" keeps us from renouncing it.

We MUST renounce it!

Not just in them, John the Baptist insists. But in us.

Change YOUR way of life, John demands of "all the people of Jerusalem." Because clearly, this IS who we are. Change YOUR hearts and minds, he says, so that you may embody the very realm of God in the face of this desolating sacrilege.

Make no mistake. In this passage from Mark, John the baptizer is instituting an inherently *political* sacrament. Not "political" in the sense of Republicans and Democrats or the Green Party or the Constitution Party. But political in the sense of "*how we live together in community.*"

Baptism for John is not a personal moment of spiritual renewal. It is a communal commitment to the realm of God. A "reverse Exodus," if you will, for the people to re-imagine God's land of promise and plenty.

Never forget, for the first century Judeans who have come to be baptized by John, the mythic memory of the Jordan River as a boundary between slavery and freedom looms large. Their forbears in the faith - OUR forbears in the faith - escaping imperial power in Egypt, wandering the Sinai wilderness for forty years, desperately seeking the Jordan River as a literal boundary between a life of slavery in Egypt and a life of freedom in a land of promise and plenty. The first century Judeans who have come to be baptized by John in the Jordan, like their ancestors fleeing slavery in Egypt, also long to be free from the desolating sacrilege still sanctioned too strongly by their very own leaders.

The first century Judeans seeking baptism in the Jordan River see their baptism as a literal redemption from the political and economic power of that desolating sacrilege—and the temptations that come with the slight possibilities that just maybe a few of them could benefit from that power.

Instead the first century Judeans seeking baptism in the Jordan River are choosing to live once and for all in allegiance to the eternal family of God. The realm of God, if you will. And allegiance to the realm of God means that the one being baptized must exorcise those self-colonizing, self-destructive, *sacrilegious* values that came with the dominating, enslaving imperial power: a cult of idolatry, cutthroat competitiveness, out of control economic and sexual exploitation, compulsive excess, environmental degradation, ethnic and religious oppression.

This is what Jesus does when he submerges himself to the point of near-death in the water of the Jordan, and then suffers tortuous testing in the desert. In this highly “political-in-the-sense-of-*communal*” act, the baptism of Jesus drowns the grip of sacrilegious temptation to power and privilege, as Jesus renounces the presence of evil in the world - a vow we make in our own baptismal covenant - in order to embody the realm of God emphatically in his changed heart and mind. That he might walk through the valley of the shadow. Without fearing evil. To reclaim the Jerusalem Temple for the Beloved Community.

We do the same thing when we baptize today.

The first century Judeans seeking baptism by John in the Jordan want no part of the sacrilegious system of power that enslaves everything around them, *and we don't either!* We want *God's* power of *freedom!* So instead of living according to imperial values—including the literal enslavement of other human beings—the one who is baptized commits to live according to the values of the realm of God, and in the process to de-colonize our very souls.

This is no “cheap grace,” in the words of German theologian and Nazi resister Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as we renew the baptismal covenant today. We are not splashing around in the kiddie pool when we claim the grace of God to transform our hearts and minds to the point where we are willing to join Jesus in renouncing evil, and proclaiming justice and a peace that passes all understanding. When we walk through the valley of the shadow, in the temples of our own time, even to the point of giving our lives for the sake of the realm of God.

Never forget John the Baptist will lose his own head to that evil in just a few chapters. Jesus, himself, will lose his life to the evil he renounces. A *costly* grace, if there ever was one.

We, too, must risk it all in our provisional demonstration of The Realm of God in our midst. We, too, have had a desolating sacrilege - *a Confederate flag!* - defiling our nation's Capitol this week. As Christians, *and as Citizens*, we must renounce that evil and speak truth to the power that represents us in our fragile democracy.

I call upon you, I plead with you, to make your voices heard with your elected officials. I will not tell you what to say to them. But I will say it is your duty, as members of the baptized Body of Christ, to bear witness to The Realm of God that is beyond any political party. But is most emphatically “political.”

And as you do, I bid you come, renew that covenant of grace we know in our baptism. Come evoke the elemental force of water that will truly save your soul if you let it. That will wash away all that binds you to the desolating sacrilege that has stained the temple of our nation's capital. So that you and I together might move fluidly in this world. In The Way of Jesus. With courage. And with grace. Amen.