



# First Sunday after Epiphany

## January 10, 2021

Prelude: "O Love, How Deep, How Broad, How High"

### Gathering

Liturgist: Ascribe to the Lord, you heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

**All:** **Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness.**

Liturgist: The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is majestic; the voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the voice of the Lord strikes with flashes of lightning; the voice of the Lord shakes the desert; the voice of the Lord strips the forests bare. And all in his temple cry,

**All: Glory!** *Psalm 29:1-9 adapted*

**All Singing: 492 "Come, Thou Almighty King"**

God's Greeting  
Passing the Peace

### Reconciliation

Liturgist: The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

**All: I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way – a voice of one calling in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight paths for him."**  
*Mark 1:1-3*

Liturgist: Lord hear us as we pray:

**All: By that which we have done and that which we left undone we have neglected to prepare the way. We have settled for crooked paths. We have made our own way. We have not always made a way for the Lord in our hearts, in our relationships, or in our world.**

### *Silent Confession and Reflection*

Liturgist: John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him.

**All: Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.**

**All Singing: 790 “Baptized in Water”**

Liturgist: And this was John’s message: After me comes one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. *Mark 1:4-8 adapted*

**All: As those baptized by the Holy Spirit of God, and sealed for the day of redemption, let us get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, and every form of malice.**

Liturgist: Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you.

**All: Let us follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.** *Ephesians 4:30–5:2 adapted*

## **Proclamation**

**All Singing: 747 “Breathe on Me, Breath of God”**

Scripture: Mark 1:9-13

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.”

Minister: The Word of the Lord.

**All: Thanks be to God.**

Sermon: Fathers and Sons

**All Singing: 339 “He Knows My Name”**  
*Soloist singing verse 1, all singing verse 2*

## **Dedication**

Prayers of the People

**All Singing: 946 “Go, My Children, with My Blessing”**

Benediction

Minister: The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord is enthroned as King forever.  
The Lord gives strength to his people; the Lord blesses his people with peace.  
*Psalm 29: 10-11*

**Worship Leaders**

Pianist / Vocalist:	Erin Pacheco
Organist:	Dora Diephouse
Soloist:	Evelyn Evenhouse
Liturgist / Vocalist:	Mary Medema
Prayer / Vocalist:	Glenn Medema
Sound / Video:	Schuyler Roozeboom
Minister:	Roger Nelson

Hymns are from *Lift Up Your Hearts* (Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2013)  
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Text: Mark 1: 9-13  
Title: Fathers and Sons  
Date: 01.10.21  
Roger Allen Nelson

Bruce Springsteen's father worked at a mill in New Jersey until it closed and then he bounced between factory jobs and driving jobs. In Springsteen's music and stories his father is a dark, brooding character – often pictured smoking and drinking at the kitchen table and lashing out in anger at his son. Theirs was troubled tumultuous relationship.

Years and years of therapy gave Springsteen the courage and clarity to write and talk about his father. As he dealt with his own mental health issues, he came to better understand his father's struggles with depression.

I saw Springsteen's one-man-show on Broadway. He laced together stories of his life, relationships, and sense of things with simple sparse versions of songs. And after better than 40 years of living with the man and his music, for me, it was a haunting, holy, powerful night. At one point in that show Springsteen says this about his father:

*Now those whose love we wanted but didn't get, we emulate them. That's the only way we have, in our power, to get the closeness and love that we needed and desired. So, when I was a young man looking for a voice to meld with mine, to sing my songs and to tell my stories, well I chose my father's voice. Because there was something sacred in it to me. And when I went looking for something to wear, I put on a factory worker's clothes, because they were my dad's clothes. And all we know about manhood is what we have seen and what we have learned from our fathers, and my father was my hero. And my greatest foe.*

He goes on to share a dream where there's some tenderness and reconciliation with his father. I couldn't stop the tears streaming down my face.

I had a troubled tumultuous relationship with my father – a college history professor. I pushed hard against him and his faith. He was killed when I was 24, before there was much opportunity for tenderness or reconciliation. And yet, when I went looking for a voice to meld with mine all I had was my father's. And every time I lace up a pair of wingtips (my father's shoes) and walk into this pulpit I'm struggling with my hero and my greatest foe.

The relationship between fathers and sons is complicated – haunting, holy, and powerful. There's a deep existential longing for blessing. Sons need their father's blessing. And when it's not there (for whatever reason) there's often grief, trauma, searching, confusion and conflict. With blessing there's freedom to flourish from a place of *hesed* – an unshakable love and mercy. That doesn't mean there won't be struggle and stumbling, but it does mean that the ground is firm.

Dear friends, this morning I want to draw your attention to blessing of the Father to the Son. Consider....

Mark's gospel is noteworthy for its brisk clipped pace. Everything is dense and compact. And that's true of our text.

John is waist deep in the Jordan baptizing people, but when Jesus arrives all manner of cosmic drama breaks out: The firmament that holds back the waters is gashed open and God gushes through. The Spirit descends, the Son ascends, and the voice of God speaks a blessing. The fullness of God – the Trinity – all packed into two short verses.

Kathleen Norris writes of it:

*The occasion of his baptism is so momentous that we are jolted all the way back to the first chapter of Genesis, as the separation of earth and sky that God established at creation is refigured. God breaks through in order to speak directly to human beings.*

This is the story of a new creation. The first verse of Mark's gospel reads, "The beginning of the good news about Jesus..." And by the tenth verse the Spirit is hovering over the waters as God enters in to affirm Jesus as his son.

Now. In the other gospels the language is polite and sterile. "Heaven was opened..." Here, Mark uses the language of the heavens being torn. The Greek word is *schizomenous*, the same root from which we get schizophrenia.

This is not a gentle opening.

This is a rupture.

This is a tear in creation's fabric.

This is the rending of the heavens.

And, the only other place this word is used in Mark's gospel is at the death of Jesus – where Jesus breathes his last and the curtain of the temple is torn from top to bottom.

So, at the start of Mark's gospel the heavens are split, the Spirit descends, Jesus rises up out of the waters of baptism, and God proclaims,

*You are my son whom I love; with you I am well pleased.*

And, at the end of Mark's gospel the temple veil is split, Jesus offers up his last breath, descends into death, and the centurion proclaims,

*Surely, this man was the Son of God.*

Like bookends to the story of Jesus, creation is rent asunder in a moment of cosmic clarity. And, in that, a new world dawns, a new relationship between God and humanity is enacted, and at heart of it all there is the blessing of a father to a son.

The birth of Jesus doesn't appear in all four gospels, but the baptism of Jesus does. Therefore, this story, image, and blessing seems essential for telling the good news of Jesus....

And, in Mark, immediately after his baptism and blessing Jesus is thrown out into the wilderness. Again, the word here does not suggest a gentle nudge but it has the sense of being violently thrust or thrown forward. It's the word often used for the casting out of demons.

We typically think of the wilderness as a place where we're tested and shaped; where through some difficulty, temptation, or struggle our sense of identity is formed.

But it's also easy to get lost,  
it's easy to get turned sideways,  
it's easy to believe the lies,  
it's easy to lose your self in the wilderness. So....

So, is it worth noting that before Jesus is cast into the wilderness, he knows the blessing of his father? Is it a stretch to suggest that the blessing of the Father is essential for the Son to know who he is and to what he's called? Without the blessing would Jesus have found his way through the wilderness?

A little aside. I know how sexist and gender specific this text and sermon sound. The gospel is written in a patriarchal, shame and blessing culture. But, in trying to be faithful to the written text I'm not dismissing or diminishing the need for blessing between mothers and daughters, or between any parent and any child.

I don't know a son who doesn't need to hear the blessing of his father.  
I don't know a daughter who doesn't need the blessing of her mother.  
I don't know a one of us who doesn't need to hear again and again and again, "You are loved. With you I am well pleased." And, I don't know a way through the wilderness without that essential blessing.

As it turns out, I've never known the sky to be torn open and I've never heard the audible voice of God. My struggles with my father were my own doing. I pushed away the blessing that he was offering. And yet, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be standing here without the tug and tether of that relationship....

And part of that is because while blessing is communicated through our mothers and fathers, it is also communicated through others. There are others who in all sorts of ways help us hear the blessing of our fathers and mothers, and in that the blessing of God.

Dear friends, the heart of the gospel is that you are loved by God in Christ – of which baptism is a sign and a seal.

It's easy to forget, deny, or dismiss that reality and chase after all sorts of other ways to feel beloved. But, it is next to impossible to believe that you are loved by an invisible God when you don't feel loved by the visible followers of God. At its best the church is a tangible reminder of that blessing. An essential part of our calling is to say in as many ways as possible, and through as many people as possible,

*This is my daughter, whom I love; with her I am well pleased.  
This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.*

Last year when we read Matthew's version of this story you were invited forward for an expression of baptismal remembrance. An elder dipped his or her finger in the waters of baptism, traced the cross on your forehead, and offered a word of blessing. Elder Emily Bosscher wrote about the experience of both giving and receiving that blessing. In Emily's words:

*The water was cold, but the pressure of her finger warm on my forehead. As she looked me in the eyes, I was told that I belong, in life and death, to Jesus Christ. In that moment I no longer only knew it. I felt it. I felt it the cold water dripping down my arm, in the contact between my fingers and the skin of others as I traced the cross, in the tightness in my throat, the tears, the smiles, and the joy with which I was able to proclaim to everyone I looked in the eye, "You belong, in life and death, to Jesus Christ." And because of that, there is no need to fear.*

Thanks be to God.

So, this morning, dear friends, may you hear the blessing of the Father – that you are a child of God, and with you God is well pleased. And may we also find ways to offer that same blessing to others – as a sign of a new creation and a way through the wilderness.

Amen.