

First Sunday after Epiphany, January 10, 2021

On behalf of the family of faith at Community United Church of Christ, Medford, WI,
welcome to this time of worship!

“No matter who you are or where you are on your life’s journey,
you are welcome here!”

For those in darkness, Christ is the light. For those in despair, Christ is the hope.

For those grieving, Christ is a comfort.

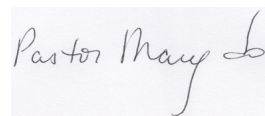
For those burdened, Christ is a friend to share the load.

For those who are anxious, Christ is calm assurance.

For all gathered today, hear the call to follow Christ and *be Christ* to one another.

Today’s worship service has been offered by the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ for this 1st Sunday after Epiphany. Staff members of the WI Conference have read the scriptures, have prayed, have shared their musical talents and have preached. After watching it myself, I was moved and inspired by the message, the scriptures, the prayers and the music and felt that we should all share in these precious moments together. If you have internet access, you will find it on our website, uccmedford.org/media

Blessings to you during these days of Epiphany,



This is a reading from the Gospel of Mark 1:4-11 Common English Bible

John’s preaching

4 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. 5 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. 6 John wore clothes made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. 7 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. 8 I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Jesus is baptized

9 About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. 10 While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. 11 And there was a voice from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness.”

Genesis 1:1-5 Common English Bible *World’s creation in seven days*

1 When God began to create[a] the heavens and the earth— 2 the earth was without shape or form, it was dark over the deep sea, and God’s wind swept over the waters— 3 God said, “Let there be light.” And so light appeared. 4 God saw how good the light was. God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God named the light Day and the darkness Night. There was evening and there was morning: the first day.

Psalms 29 *A psalm of David.*

1 You, divine beings! Give to the Lord—give to the Lord glory and power!
2 Give to the Lord the glory due his name! Bow down to the Lord in holy splendor!
3 The Lord’s voice is over the waters; the glorious God thunders; the Lord is over the mighty waters.
4 The Lord’s voice is strong; the Lord’s voice is majestic.
5 The Lord’s voice breaks cedar trees—yes, the Lord shatters the cedars of Lebanon.
6 He makes Lebanon jump around like a young bull, makes Sirion jump around like a young wild ox.
7 The Lord’s voice unleashes fiery flames;
8 the Lord’s voice shakes the wilderness—yes, the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
9 The Lord’s voice convulses the oaks, strips the forests bare, but in his temple everyone shouts, “Glory!”
10 The Lord sits enthroned over the floodwaters; the Lord sits enthroned—king forever!
11 Let the Lord give strength to his people! Let the Lord bless his people with peace!

Mark 1:4-11 Common English Bible

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The Message by Rev. Lorraine Cenicerros, WI Conference UCC Minister,
working with the Southwest and Southeast Associations

This past year we were forced to learn how to celebrate the big moments in our lives differently. Birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, ordinations, installations, the birth of a new baby, the death of a loved one. All these events where we gather together to laugh and to cry, to share joy or to share sorrow have had to be adjusted or even postponed until it is safe for us to gather again.

It is important to celebrate or share the momentous times on our lives. Times when something is completed, when a beginning or ending is marked, and life takes a turn, one way or another.

In the first chapter of the Gospel according to Mark, John the Baptist is inviting the people of Jerusalem and those from the Judean countryside into one of those momentous times in their life. Repent! John is proclaiming, repent, in forgiveness for your sins and turn to God. For John, to repent meant to turn your life around. It meant to let go of who you were, where you were going, do a 180 degree turn and move towards God.

That is a big moment in a life. If you have been baptized by immersion as an adult or young adult, you will know what I mean. You stand in the water acknowledging the pain and sin in your life, the actions you have been a part of that have served to separate and alienate yourself or others. As you fall back into the water you let go of the heaviness, the fear, the pain and the shame.

When you break out of the water, the lifegiving water, it feels like all you were carrying has been washed away. You feel fresh and new almost like you were born again! Whether you were baptized as an infant or an adult, it was a time for celebration! Do you or your family celebrate the anniversary of your baptism, or the anniversary of your children's baptism? If you are like most people, you probably don't.

I was an infant when my parents had me baptized into the Catholic church, so I don't know the date of that momentous occasion. My baptism was done as a tradition in the family. My father was catholic, a non-practicing catholic, but a catholic none-the-less. My mother was protestant and was not familiar with infant baptism. My siblings and I were baptized fulfill an obligation. My father wanted the sacrament done to please his mother who was a devout catholic. My mother said yes to infant baptism because it was a promise she made to a priest, so she and my father could marry in the catholic church. The event allowed for a grand party and everyone was happy. My grandmother was satisfied because it meant if her grandchildren died before the age of awareness our souls would return to God.

Whatever the theological understanding was for your baptism I would imagine there were no connections made between the baptism, and what that might mean in everyday life.

Mark begins his gospel with Jesus going to John to be baptized before Jesus begins his ministry. We are not treated to the birth story but to the story of God affirming and recognizing Jesus as God's own. In Mark's Gospel, God's blessing was not given for those in the crowd to hear. God's words to Jesus were personal and powerful and for his ears alone. "You are my son, my beloved. With you I am well pleased." Wrapped in these words are blessings of identity, worth, unwavering regard and acceptance.

Acceptance for being God's own. Acceptance as God's beloved.

Mark tells us immediately after his baptism, Jesus is driven into the wilderness. We don't know how many times Jesus might have remembered those words, the blessing, God's affirmation, that descended on him like a dove, and how they might have sustained him while he was in the wilderness or provided strength to him as he began his ministry. We don't know how those words might have been instrumental in supporting Jesus as he turned his face toward Jerusalem to make that final trek to the cross.

What I do know is whether baptized as an infant or an adult or not baptized at all, those words of acceptance and love are given to each and every one of us, as God's people.

In our world today, we are surrounded by a more superficial type of acceptance. Social media can be a wonderful way to stay connected to family and friends who live far away and can be a delightful way to connect with like-minded people and share similar interests. Social media platforms are popular and powerful, and they have the capacity to offer feelings that often feel like acceptance, in large doses.

The acceptance we receive on social media might be superficial, but it means we are noticed, we are affirmed, if only by those online.

But there is another side to that quick acceptance. As much as we might not want to admit this, it's difficult to not wonder what is wrong with the picture we posted, or maybe even what might be wrong with us, if only a few people "like" our posts when others might receive over a hundred or more likes? As social beings created for community, we need to feel accepted but what we are really getting is the feeling of fitting in.

The two are not the same - acceptance and "fitting in." They are the opposite of each other. Fitting in is the skill we learned most intensely as we moved through our youth. Fitting in is about changing yourself to be accepted by your peers.¹ True acceptance is being recognized and valued just as you are. Just as you are. And "there is nothing more important or necessary in leading a healthy, productive life" than the feeling of being accepted."²

In Mark's Gospel, God's affirmation and acceptance of Jesus as he rose out of the water at his baptism, isn't just the introduction to what comes later in his life, it's the foundation and the highpoint of the story. Every time Jesus "heals the sick, feeds the hungry, welcomes the outcast, he does to others what has already been done to him. Jesus tells those he heals, by his words and his deeds that they, too, are beloved children of God with whom God is well pleased."³

The "darkest moment of Jesus' story, when he feels absolutely abandoned, is immediately followed by the story of resurrection when God keeps her promise and continues to accept and honor Jesus as God's own beloved Son.

At our low moments, "remember that the God who raised Jesus from the dead is the same one who promises to never abandon us and to love and accept us always and still as beloved children, even and especially, when we have a hard time loving and accepting ourselves."⁴

For a generation that has allowed cheap "likes" to be a substitute for genuine acceptance, there is no more powerful sense of belonging than knowing you have God's love, not because of what you might have done or not done, but because of who you are, just as you are.

Friends, when you shower or bathe for the day, lift your face, let the water flow over you and feel the love of God envelop you. Let the water be a reminder of Jesus' baptism, of God's unfailing acceptance and love for you. Allow that feeling of unconditional regard support you for the day to come.

Always and forever a bright new beginning to sustain you as you move through the world. Amen