

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church
"Water and Spirit"

I don't move through life constantly thinking, "What bad thing is going to be next?" or "When will the other shoe drop?" or "I wonder what crisis will befall me or our world today." Like many of you, I'm generally a positive person. Oh, I know, anything can happen and we can be caught off guard, but I don't live most days with a sense of impending doom. And so it was last Wednesday, when I was involved in my work, preparing for a bible study that evening, that my wife, Kelly, called and asked if I knew what was happening in the nation's capital. I hadn't been on social media or watched any news that day, so I didn't know. I was just happily going about my work until she said, "You'd better check it out. There's a mob rushing the capitol building in Washington D.C. and it's pretty bad." I'm sure we all watched in real time or saw the reports of the assault on one of our most important buildings, a building that symbolizes American democracy. Now, we know politics divide us, maybe more so than any other aspect of our lives, but what we witnessed last week has nothing to do with political debate or social discourse about the issues of the day. This was violence and vandalism at its most base level and there is no way to justify it. The day after, I wrote a note to the congregation inviting us to come together in prayer, to pray for our nation but to also pray that the way of Jesus would, once more, work its way down into our hearts so that we will be renewed in our commitment to be shaped by God's love, especially in the ways we think about and respond to one another. We end our prayers with the word, "Amen." This comes from the Hebrew word which means "it is true" or "let it be so." As we hope for the smooth transition of presidential power and long for the healing of what divides us as a nation, Amen - "let it be so" and "may it be true."

We are reminded more often than we need, it seems, that the world can be a tough place. As I said a moment ago, anything can happen, and we can feel shaken. Because of this, it's significant that the Gospel of Mark says the mission of Jesus began in the wilderness. The wilderness, a place where there are threats and we feel vulnerable. John the Baptist was there with crowds from the surrounding area. John, standing waist deep in the Jordan River, baptized the people for the forgiveness of their sin. We can find ourselves in a spiritual wilderness, too. We've just come through the season of Advent and Christmas, and we spent nearly a month getting ready because we know that when it comes to what God is doing, we must be prepared. We know from experience that it is easy to miss the God-moments. Even now, after the challenging year of 2020 and a day last week that some are describing as one of the darkest in our history, we may be wrapped up in our own agendas and less aware of what God wants us to be about. So, John was baptizing to prepare the people, to focus them on their need for God, and, by way of the flowing of water, open their hearts to the pouring out of God's forgiving grace. It was there, in the wilderness and in preparation to be forgiven, that Jesus came to the Jordan so that he, too, could be baptized by John.

Before we share more about the story of Jesus' baptism, let me share a couple of baptism stories that have impacted my ministry. First, is the story about a man who was 84 years old, who asked me one day if he could set up an appointment to talk about something that was worrying him. "Of course," I said, and we agreed to meet in my office at the church I was serving at the time. He was an active member of the congregation, coming to worship and connected to the life of the church. As we talked, he said he had a birthday coming up. He'd be 85 and he knew he was not getting younger. He said, "Pastor, I'm worried. I've never been baptized, and I don't know what will happen if I die and haven't experienced that." He was visibly emotional about it. I thanked him for sharing what he was feeling and then we talked about what he knew was true about the way his life was involved with God. He'd felt God's presence with him over the years. He'd been comforted many times because of his faith and through the prayers of others. The more we talked the more evidence there was that he had always been assured that he was a child of God. "Let's plan to celebrate your baptism," I said, "but this will not be the start of something new for you but a celebration of what has always been. God is not waiting for your baptism to wrap you in eternal love," I told him. We both knew that God's love for him had always been there for him. My second story is about a young couple who, like the older man, were active people of faith. They'd been trying for years to become pregnant but it didn't happen, until the news one day that they were expecting triplets. What an incredible blessing, they felt this to be. But then, in the last months of the pregnancy, a problem developed. She was hospitalized and the complications meant the babies had to be delivered early. I was called to the hospital and a few of the family members met me in the hallway to update me on the situation. Sadly, the babies had not survived. What had been the expectation of joy had turned into a deep loss. When I walked into the room the couple was there, along with the babies wrapped in blankets. They asked me, "Can we baptize our children?" "Of course," I said. We gathered water, I held the tiny bodies of each baby and in turn baptized them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Tears flowed with the water that day, but even in that sadness there was the certainty that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

When Jesus was baptized the gospel tells us there was more than water flowing that day. Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit and he heard the voice of God name him as God's Son, God's Beloved, and God's incredible affirmation was made clear, "with you I am well pleased." John the Baptizer said that what was going to happen through Jesus was going to be different, deeper and more powerful. He was right. Jesus's baptism brought the flowing of the Holy Spirit into his life and

initiated his mission of bringing that spirit power into our lives. One of the reasons Jesus is our Savior is because what God is doing in him becomes what's possible in us. The waters of baptism have touched our heads somewhere along the path of our lives and the gospel wants us to know that there is more than a watermark on us. I believe the heavens are continually opening for us and the Spirit is flowing, ready to fill us. Our task is to stand in that stream so that God's presence can shape who we are and how we live. Worshipping regularly helps us to stand in the stream. Taking time to pray, which involves not just talking to God but listening, helps us stand in the stream. Acknowledging the anxiousness we feel in response to the troubles of the day, is important, but waiting to listen for God's voice before we respond is a way of standing in the stream and being filled with the Spirit. God's call of our lives is not just to get our feet wet in this faith but to stand in the stream of the poured out Spirit so that whether we are in this building, or in our homes, or going about our lives in the world, we are awash in the reality of God's love and grace.

There is a liturgy in the church, observed every so often, that asks us to "remember your baptism." It's even more helpful to remember what Martin Luther, the German monk of the middle ages, said to himself whenever he was troubled or threatened. He would say, "I am baptized! I am baptized!" And so are we, baptized with water, filled with the Spirit, and claimed today and always as the Beloved of God. Amen.