

"Hearing the Voice of God On Our Lives"

January 10, 2021; 9:00 am

Mark 1:4-11

Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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## **I. WHERE IS GOD'S PRESENCE TO BE FOUND?**

Do you ever wonder, "Where is God" when life gets hard? When our very foundations seem to shake to the core? When unbelievable and unexpected events just seem to pile up and never stop?

Do you ever wonder, "Where is God," when life is going relatively *well*, but it's hard to *see* signs of God's working in the world? Or, to *feel* God's presence in your life or heart? Do you ever wonder if God speaks to everybody *else*, but not to you?

Eric Elnes, in his book about finding God, "Gifts of the Dark Wood," gives us a concept that might help, as we try to get our minds around this.

He suggests that God's presence and guidance might come to us in the form of a "special set of markers," called "***Sweet spot moments.***" –

Consider this:

*Golf clubs, baseball and cricket bats, and tennis rackets all have sweet spots. Human lives do, too...Just as the sweet spot of a racket is found by adjusting the continuous impacts made by a ball moving in the opposite direction, so your internal sweet spot tends to be revealed through direct challenge. You keep adjusting your responses until*

*they begin coming from a place where you feel most fully yourself—most fully free, yet wholeheartedly engaged and alive."* (Eric Elnes, p. 9, *Gifts of the Dark Wood*)

## **II. JESUS' SWEET SPOT EVENT**

One day Jesus encountered just such a "sweet spot moment." Hear this story again and listen for the descriptors that speak to you and bring that day alive for you. Can you picture yourself there, down at the River?

The MESSAGE, Mark 1:4-11

<sup>4-6</sup> John the Baptizer appeared in the wild, preaching a baptism of life-change that leads to forgiveness of sins. People thronged to him from Judea and Jerusalem and, as they confessed their sins, were baptized by him in the Jordan River into a changed life. John wore a camel-hair habit, tied at the waist with a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild field honey.

<sup>7-8</sup> As he preached he said, "The real action comes next: The star in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will change your life. I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. His baptism—a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit—will change you from the inside out."

<sup>9-11</sup> At this time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. The moment he came out of the water, he saw the sky split open and God's Spirit, looking like a dove, come down on him. Along with the Spirit, a voice: "You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life."

### **III. SOMETHING HAPPENING HERE!**

What struck you, hearing that scene described a couple different ways?

#### **A. ALL the people!!**

All went out from Jerusalem. The whole Judean countryside. But Jesus came from Nazareth! He was an “Out of townner.” Now, this “everybody and all” may be a bit of exaggeration on the part of the writer of Mark’s Gospel, but you get the point. “The whole countryside” is a metaphor for a bunch of souls! It was a tent revival down by the river, the likes of which had not been seen for awhile!

#### **B. “Jesus saw the heavens open.”**

And Jesus came from Nazareth—over 27 miles—quite a hoof! And he came down to the River and presented himself to John to be baptized. I wonder if he had to wait in a long line? I wonder if he was especially hot, dusty and weary, as he came? Wondering if it was worth the journey; if God has truly called him there.

And the heavens broke open! God showed up! And the Spirit spoke to him! Told him who he was, Whose he was, and how amazing and beloved he had always been.

He heard the Voice of God. Of felt it? Or sensed it?

And I wonder, did anyone *else*? Did anyone besides Jesus see the Dove? Hear the words? If all those people were swarming there from all over the place, were they a big audience for Jesus’ sweet spot moment, listening in, watching it all happen?!

Or, did he have to trust that Inner Voice of Love? Need to know deep down in his own heart without external affirmation, that this WAS God speaking to him?

Affirming his Being. Calling him Beloved. My own. “On whom my favor rests.”

#### **C. Affirmation & Guidance—Elusive?**

How do you know? We don’t always GET external affirmation—especially at pivotal moments on the journey. Moments when we go “down to the River to Pray,” have our quiet time with God, in the Holy Presence of Creation.

We have to be awake, attuned, and ready to be surprised. Jesus might have been the most surprised of anyway, when God showed up! When the heavens opened.

Was he looking for guidance? Seeking some sign that he was, actually, on the right path? In step with God’s purpose for his life? Or, did he just go along with the crowd? “Everybody was doing it!” Everybody—the whole Judean countryside; all of Jerusalem was going out to the desert to get Baptized by John. Jesus may have just wanted to be part of the community!

Maybe he wanted to belong. To be part of the crowd. Line up with his community, wear a mask, and go cast his vote. Take a stand; protest for peace and justice. Be part of the movement for unity, compassion and healing of the land. Get the vaccine.

But maybe, too, it was all of that and more! Yes, he wanted to join with others seeking something. Longing for a new path; a better way to live and love.

#### **D. A Baptism of Repentance—Be the Change!**

John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River **into a changed life**. John was offering a “baptism of Repentance,” but this was so much more than we have come to understand that word.

You see, “Repent” means so much more than feeling “sorry” for your sins and vowing to do better—a quick drive-by confession booth promise. It literally means: *Metanoia—change*. Turning down a NEW path.

Turning *over* the tables and plans where they are not *life-giving*, but in fact causing suffering—where “the way things are” leads to corrupt and harmful ways of life and a lack of love—in our lives and in others’.

When we repent in the biblical sense, we vow to let God change our lives. To turn around, but not necessarily *back* the way we came from. Turn down *another* Road. Take *another* way home—like the Wise Ones did after they encountered those who sought to harm the innocents.

People were streaming out to the Desert, teeming with excitement, seeking what John had to offer, not *only* because they felt the need to confess their sins, but because they were *hungry for change*. Tired.

Longing for things to be different. Looking inside themselves and in their hearts for that life change. Looking outside themselves, at the dog-eat-dog world they dwelt in. Truly, they were full of hopes *and* fears—wary from *years* of oppression, war, inequity, starvation for some—too many. They were *tired* of this life in this world of woe that was anything BUT what God intended for all of creation.

#### **IV. WHAT WAS JESUS SEEKING?**

Jesus was surely looking for all that and more. As he made his way down to the river to pray. As he took the steps, joined with his neighbors and strangers on that journey of looking toward and working for a better way. And, Jesus found what he was looking for. Even if he didn’t quite realize it!

God made God’s presence known to him. “The heavens opened.” This is not literally the skies breaking in pieces, but you can probably imagine it.

Think of a socked-in day where finally, gradually, the sun insists on shining through and the clouds can’t help but give way, parting gradually and then more in earnest, until the heavens have literally *broken open* and the Light shines in where once was grayness and dark.

The Celtic Christians spoke of such epiphanies as “the Veil became thin” between the Divine and Human realms. Jesus was gifted with a glimpse through that thin veil of the sacred realm and experienced a very *earthy* and *earthly* confirmation.

The Spirit, like a Dove, was saying, in that moment a big YES! to him. To his life, his heart, his path.

Can *we* hear these words of the Holy Spirit to us as well? Sense that thin Veil? Feel that affirmation?

“Yes, my Child! You ARE who I created you to be. You ARE whole and fearfully and wonderfully made—complete. You are now called to a bigger, broader path. Called to experience the world and those around you and those friends you haven’t met yet, through

God's expansive eyes, with God's all-encompassing embrace."

## **V. WHEN FOUNDATIONS SHAKE**

This week, on the Day of Epiphany, our lives were shaken—our foundations threatened. Sadly, this was not a joyful event of the heavens opening and the Voice of God thundering upon us with an affirmation of our belovedness and the gift of our Calling.

But wait! Maybe it was! For Epiphany, Baptism and God's presence in our lives—our very identity in God—was *not* shaken at its foundations on Wednesday.

Our identity as God's beloved children with God's undeniable call upon our lives, as well as our faithful response to it, are strong and secure; impenetrable walls of Grace and Faith.

If we are shaken by the events in the world around us, let it be "shaken up" in a GOOD way. Awakened, stirred like the waters of Baptism, to be quiet or indifferent no more to the needs of our neighbor, to the deep concerns of our world.

Why should we be "shaken up for good," and not just let things be and trust God and others to take care of them? Because we are Baptized persons. Because, in our being claimed and named by God as "beloved Children," we made promises in return, and make them everyday, to love as God loves this world—to name the evil *and* the good—and to work toward justice and goodness for all, with every ounce of our being. On Wednesday night, after the tragic and bedrock-shaking events unfolded in our country, many Christians gathered in prayer.

John Dorhauer, leader of the UCC, spoke to our place and role in this world as ones who have **hope** and commitment to changing the world for good, because we are Baptized. **That** is our foundation.

John Dorhauer: "I feel called to do everything in my power to name evil and confront it. I take very seriously that part of our baptismal vows that reads: "Do you promise, by the grace of God, ... to resist the powers of evil." I made that promise. As a pastor who has baptized many, I have asked others to take that promise. As I say—I take it very seriously.

When the evil of racism destroys the lives of people of color, my baptismal vows ask me to resist it.

When the evil of homophobia leads to the humiliation of our kindred who identify as gay or lesbian or bi or trans or queer, my baptismal vows ask me to resist it.

When the evil of climate change threatens to undo life on this planet as we know it, my baptismal vows ask me to resist it."

These are the promises we made before, and re-make as we reaffirm and remember our Baptism today. This is the faithful response we can make as followers of Christ, as we seek God's voice leading and guiding us all into the days ahead.

Do you promise, by the grace of God, to be Christ's disciple(s), to follow in the way of our Savior, to resist oppression and evil in whatever forms they present themselves, to show love and justice, and

to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ as best you are able? **We do!**

## **VI. HEARING GOD IN OUR LIVES**

Ever wonder where God is, when life gets hard? When you can't hear the voice, feel the dove alighting on your shoulder? Just don't get the heavens breaking open and the voice of God thundering down upon you?

Keep wondering. But keep looking up, too, listening, becoming aware in ways you haven't before. Remembering that you are never outside of the claiming and naming loving arms of your Creator.

Listen up! God is calling.

Not just in the usual ways, but in the news, and the background music, and the silence.

Wherever you are: at home, at work, at school, at play...

whether those are all the same place or if they require careful planning to reach, listen.

Hear this reminder: God calls us, every one, to imitate Christ's life.

Not just pretty words, not just for special people, not just in the perfect circumstances — the Spirit's voice leads us to action.

We long to encounter the Living Word, in the sanctuary of our hearts and in the streets of our community.

Children of God, as we go from this gathering and back into our everyday lives, let us continue to worship, and hear, and be transformed. Amen.

## **REAFFIRMATION of BAPTISM**

We talk of Epiphany as the time when the Wise Ones come, *recognize* they are in the presence of the Holy, kneel down and worship. But Epiphany is not just one event. One day, or even one season. Epiphany is when God breaks in, and we see it. When we wake up and declare: "Surely, God was in this place and I now know it!"

Baptism is an Epiphany. Remembering and reaffirming our Baptism—that moment we were marked, named and claimed by our Maker—is an epiphany. Our challenge is not to leave that moment on the mountaintop. Or, at the manger—kneeling before the Christ Child, or at the River, or the Baptismal Font. But, to live *epiphanic lives*—looking for the "God moments"—the sweet spots.

The nudges, the whispers, the droplets on the forehead, streaming down, joining with our tears, perhaps, and reminding us of Who and Whose we are.

Dip your hand into the water that you have before you.

Put the sign of the cross on your forehead, or the head of someone in the room with you.

Do you renew and affirm the promises made at your Baptism?

**I do.**

Do you recognize the call of God to be God's people always?

**I do.**

Do you embrace the way of Jesus in faith and ministry?

**I do**

Do you accept the nurture of the Holy Spirit who renews your spirit each day?

**I do.**

Do you accept and embrace others who seek a liberating faith in God?

**I do.**

In renewing your baptismal vows,  
remember your Baptism as a mark of acceptance  
and welcome into the care of Christ's church  
where you may begin again, renewed and refreshed,  
your Christian faith and life.