

## **Baptism of our Lord Year B 2021**

### **January 10, 2021**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, it has been an awful week in American history, as earlier this week a violent mob of domestic terrorists stormed the US Capitol building in an attempted threat to the democracy that our country holds dear. These events have led the National Council of Churches to send a letter to the US government calling for our president's immediate resignation or removal from office after endangering the citizens he is called to serve. The letter has been signed by the leaders of at least 2 dozen Christian denominations in our country. Due to the events at the capitol, many more people now live in fear of what the future may hold, or of what could have been if control of the capitol had not been regained.

As I reflect on these events, I am reminded that they are not so different from the political events surrounding Jesus' birth. It almost seems like a coincidence that these events have occurred just after Christmas, on the day of Epiphany. If you remember, the Epiphany story tells of the journey of the magi coming to visit Jesus, following a star, and visiting King Herod along the way. When the magi arrive to visit Herod and ask for information, King Herod is frightened by the thought that these people would be coming to pay homage to some new so-called king. He asks the magi to search diligently for the child and tell him where the family is staying. But after their visit with Jesus, the magi, having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, returned home by another road.

This is the part of the story that we like to tell, the part of the story that we are quite familiar with. But what comes next is important, too—and it speaks to our reality today when those in power fear that their authority is threatened.

After the magi had left and Herod realized that they had tricked him, Herod became infuriated. In his anger and fear of losing power, he ordered that all children in and around Bethlehem who were 2 years old or under be killed. Thankfully, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus had been visited by an angel and were warned to escape to Egypt. But many innocent children were killed because of Herod's insecurity. As Lutheran Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber puts it, "An insecure ruler named Herod was so threatened by the birth of Jesus that he tried to overthrow the result by putting a hit out on a toddler." Potentially thousands of innocent children were murdered due to one man's fear of losing power. And in our country this week, at least 5 individuals were killed as a direct result of the violent mob that was encouraged by the president.

Power corrupts, and fear corrupts. When those in power believe their authority is threatened, unspeakable things can occur. Unfortunately, I don't have the answer to bring peace to our nation right now. But what I do know is this: *nothing* can stop Jesus, the Word of God made flesh, from coming into our world.

Herod tried to silence Jesus as a toddler, and God prevailed. In Nazareth, they tried to silence his preaching by attempting to throw him off a cliff, but Jesus passed through the crowd unharmed. We hung Jesus on a cross to die, and in three days he was raised from death and lived again. Nothing can stop Jesus from coming into our world and speaking the Word of God.

No matter who is president, or king, or head ruler, no one can stop Jesus. No matter how much fear or violence or despair fills our world and consumes our minds, nothing can stop Jesus, the Word of God, from working in our world. As we heard last Sunday, "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it."

Despite the events of this week, despite the events of history, despite the events of days, weeks, month and years to come, God is still present, and God is still at work. God continues to bring life out of death, hope from despair, and goodness from evil.

And so, the story continues. And it brings us to today, the Baptism of our Lord. On this day, as Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River by John, he receives the gift of the Holy Spirit, and he is set apart to do the work of God in a world in need. In the same way, when the Apostle Paul visited Ephesus, and found some disciples, he learned that they had not yet heard of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, Paul baptized them, and they, too, received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and were set apart for God's work.

This is what it means to be baptized. When each of us were baptized, we received the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit calls us and gathers us as the Body of Christ. The Spirit gives us gifts to use in the world. The Spirit makes us holy and gives us faith. The Spirit inspires our prayers and prays for us when we cannot find the words. The Holy Spirit works in our lives, guiding us to respond faithfully to the world around us.

And so, like Jesus, and like the people of Ephesus, in baptism we received the gift of the Holy Spirit. But baptism also means that each of us have been set apart to do God's work in this world. In baptism, we have been set apart by God to use our gifts, abilities, possessions, and finances to speak out against violence, oppression and injustice. We have been set apart in baptism to pray for others, support those in need, care for the sick, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, and welcome the stranger.

Our call, as faithful people, as baptized children of God, is to respond to the violence, brokenness and despair in our world with the love of God. Our call is to trust that God is at work, and that God is at work through us, bringing transformation and hope into the darkness of our world, creating light amidst the chaos, and peace amid fear.

I am reminded of Mr. Rogers, who was actually ordained as a Presbyterian minister with a special call to minister to children and families through public television. He shared that when he was a boy and would see scary things in the news, his mother would say to him, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping." This is still true for us today, too, my friends. Even in the midst of destruction and hopelessness, there are still those who are helping. We've seen images of people working to clean up the Capitol building. We see those who are on the front lines in this pandemic, caring for those who are sick, even though they put themselves at risk to do so. Our food pantry has received very generous donations in the last year, and most every year, to help feed those who are hungry. There are always helpers.

And even more, God has called each of us, in baptism, to *be* the helpers. We are the light in the world for others. We let our light shine amidst the darkness. We work to bring transformation and healing when fear and brokenness are all around us.

We can do these things because God is at work in us, and God will never leave us. Nothing will stop God from working in this world. Nothing will stop God's love from spreading. Nothing will stop the Holy Spirit from providing us with gifts for service. Nothing will stop God from working in us, and setting us apart to be the helpers in this world. God will have the last word of love, peace, forgiveness and life. God will keep us as beloved children forever. Thanks be to God. Amen.