

“Dunked and Doused”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
January 10, 2021 – First Sunday after Epiphany – Baptism of Christ
Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

Harland was 70 years old when he was baptized in the waters of the River Jordan. He had lived quite a life prior that sacred moment, with his life's journey, like so many of ours, twisting and turning, like the meandering pathway of a labyrinth. Perhaps when he stood on Jordan's shore, he thought about the course of his life that led him to that place in that moment. Perhaps he remembered his childhood, when as a child of five, his father died and he had to look after his siblings while his mother worked, sometimes being away from home for days at a time. Perhaps he remembered beginning to work himself after dropping out of school when he was only 13. Maybe he thought about the many different jobs he then held over the years: Working as a farmhand, painting horse carriages, serving as a conductor on a trolley, working as a teamster in the army, stoking engines on trains, practicing law, selling life insurance, running a ferry boat company, owning a company that made acetylene lamps, peddling tires, and running an auto service station. Perhaps he thought about how while at the service station, he finally discovered what would bring him great success: Selling fried chicken. Being commissioned by the governor of his state with an honorific title, Kentucky Colonel Harland Sanders continued to sell or promote his fried chicken, with its secret blend of 11 herbs and spices, for the remainder of his life, and it earned him a fortune. So at the time of his baptism at age 70, perhaps the Colonel thought back on his life's journey and remembered that sometimes it takes many new beginnings to get things right and that you're never too old to start anew.

Please pray with me, “O God, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them, and take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen (William Sloane Coffin).”¹

Just a few weeks ago, the lectionary had us reading a portion of the same text from Mark that we read in today’s gospel lesson, and it was then that I encouraged you to beware of shouting baptists, as in, pay attention to message that they boldly proclaimed, which for John the Baptizer was for people to repent, to turn from sin and whatever they were doing in life and to turn towards God and living in the ways that God would have them live. John the Baptizer not only proclaimed this message, but he baptized, dunking people in the Jordan River in a ritual symbolizing a person’s commitment to repentance and rebirth: An old person goes into the water, and a new person comes out of it.

So when at age 30 Jesus came to Jordan’s shore, many, many years before the Kentucky Colonel did, he came to hear and heed John’s message of repentance, and he came to participate in that watery ritual of baptism symbolizing his own commitment to change and newness. For Jesus, he was turning from his vocation of being a craftsman who worked with wood and embracing a new vocation to work with human hearts: He was born again as one who would bless others as a traveling teacher and healer. And he was born again as one who would baptize, not as John did, by dunking people in water, but by dousing people with God’s Spirit.

And because of the new work of Jesus to baptize with the Spirit, people are empowered to be born again, to have new beginnings, however old they may be. This is one of the very beautiful messages of our faith,

¹ William Sloane Coffin, *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin: The Riverside Years, Volume 1* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 239.

and it is at the very heart of our tradition as followers of Jesus: We are called to change and we are enabled to change!

One of my favorite stories in the Bible where we find Jesus proclaiming this message is the story of the encounter between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus in John chapter 3. Nicodemus is described as a Pharisee and “a leader of the Jews” (John 3:1). According to Jesus, he was “a teacher of Israel” (3:10). Nicodemus, it would seem, was in a very lofty position in his world: He was esteemed and powerful, standing upon one of the highest rungs of the social ladder. And yet Jesus called lofty Nicodemus to be born again. The Greek words used by the author of John are ambiguous, and could mean either born again or born from above. Likely, this ambiguity is intentional, and Jesus was calling Nicodemus to be born again, but this time from above, in a spiritual way. Nicodemus responds: “Can you really be born again or born from above? Can you teach an old dog new tricks?” Jesus replied that yes, even the loftiest of people can and need to be made new in spirit.

Comedian Dennis Miller once said, “Born again?! No, I'm not. Excuse me for getting it right the first time.” Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus teaches us that even those like Miller, who think that they’ve gotten it right the first time, or Nicodemus, who seemed to demonstrate that he got it right the first time, are called even then by Jesus to be made new in spirit.

So how did Nicodemus respond to this call? Did ol’ Nic’ become a saint? A disciple of Christ? That we don’t know, but the Gospel of John, which is the only document to include stories about Nicodemus, does go on to tell us that he supported Jesus among his fellow Jewish leaders, calling them to offer a fair hearing to Jesus even as they were plotting against him. Nicodemus also appears after the crucifixion of

Jesus, when he and Joseph of Arimathea take the body of Jesus from the cross to Joseph's tomb, honoring Jesus by wrapping his body with cloths and applying burial spices on it according to their custom. Even if Nicodemus did not become a follower of Jesus, he certainly performed the saintly acts of a heavenly-born person.

Christ's call to change, to be born again and born of heaven, and the God-inspired ability to do so, continues for us and our world. Here in this new year, we, like Nicodemus, are called to be made new, and we are called to make the world around us new as well. Simply turning the page on a calendar doesn't really make the year new and good, in our lives or in our world. The horrific events of this last week make this abundantly clear. What will make the new year new and good is when we truly change, when we become people who enact justice and peace for all.

In these last few days, after a mob stormed the Capitol building, attacking our elected leaders, disrupting their work of honoring the voice of the people, and assaulting those assigned to protect the place, I've heard this message over and over again, that "this is not who we are." Sadly, I believe it is who we are. It is not all that we are, but it is part of who we are.

From the moment that European boots trod upon the shores of this continent, there has been violence as people who considered themselves to be superior to others worked to create prosperity for themselves at the expense of others: Native others, African others, non-Christian others. This is our heritage as a people, and it is not a glorious heritage. But it is by no means all that we are, and we can be so much better. We are not stuck in the ways of the past, nor are we doomed to repeating them; we can turn to better ways of being. We can live into the lofty ideals of being a nation where all people, who

have been created by God as equals, treat one another as equals. But this takes commitment to be born anew each day, to turn from ways that rob others of life and love, and to use whatever privilege and power we may have to struggle on behalf of those who have had their opportunities to enjoy life and love equally taken from them.

As the old Shaker hymn goes, "Turning, turning will be our delight, 'til by turning, turning, we come 'round right." Dear friends, fellow disciples, dunked and doused with the Spirit of the creator, let us re-commit ourselves this day to turning ourselves towards God, and let us be renewed in our dedication to turn the world around us towards the ways of God that bring the blessings of peace to all creation. In so doing, may we turn 'round right this day. Amen.