

With A Grateful Heart
Riverside United Church - 14 January, 2024
Mark 1: 1-20

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’”

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” ⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” ¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” ¹⁶As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” ¹⁸And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

May the words of my mouth, and the meditation on our hearts
be pleasing and acceptable in your sight
May the words that I fail to hear, yet long to hear
May they find a resting home in our hearts
This day we pray. Amen

In Mark's Gospel this morning, we hear how John played a pivotal role within the church in preparing and making ready the way for Jesus' ministry; the one who would come and baptize by the Holy Spirit. John's ministry was to introduce the people to baptism by water as a way of repentance and forgiveness. We are told that after Jesus was baptized in the river Jordan, "...that a voice came from heaven saying: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Though I have heard this passage before, for some reason I am struck with the words that the Gospel writer used when God exclaimed, **"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."** These last few words of this phrase, **"...with you I am well pleased"** or at least the manner they speak to me today, is that God's response is offered as words to show gratitude to Jesus. It strikes me as being very much a parental response. All of us, regardless if we are a parent or not, would likely respond in a similar fashion when someone we love and have cared for, willingly, and of their own accord, makes the "right" decision, even though that choice

may prove to be difficult. There is gratitude expressed with this pleasure for Jesus proceeding with his baptism. It is appreciating that doing the right thing sometimes calls for sacrifices, especially when undertaking something for the greater good of others. These words of gratefulness offered to the people are said with a full and grateful heart. God is pleased and is thankful that Jesus stepped into the river to be baptized, though he did not need to do so. God is showing pleasure, gratitude even, that Jesus accepted this act of baptism and in essence, accepting the new way forward for his public ministry.

God's response to Jesus' baptism highlights that our God is indeed a God of choice. Prior to preparing for this sermon, I never noticed how during this baptismal story that the voice of God is heard only **after** John baptizes Jesus. It is another example as to how God allows for all of us to have free choice in our life. Not only is Jesus the Son of God, made flesh for the world to come to know God's love - he is a man of choice. His baptism allows the hearers to understand it was his acceptance and ultimately his choice to wade into the water with John. Though we are not told if Jesus discerned whether or not he would agree to be baptized as a means to start his public ministry, God's response shows there had to be a moment of reflection before agreeing to accepting the symbolism of what his baptism would mean - a new way forward for the church, a new path forward for Jesus coming into his ministry. God's response to Jesus' wading into the river to be baptized shows us that the son of God was given time to discern before accepting how this simple but profound act will change the trajectory of his life's path.

Jesus' baptism as an adult makes me appreciate how other churches who perform adult baptisms see baptism in a comparable way as John did- through repentance and forgiveness. The Greek word *metatonia* helps us understand what John the Baptizer meant by his invitation for the people to come and be baptized through repentance. *Metatonia* means to change your perception, your behaviour or your thoughts about the world. To have a change of heart. In other words, baptism is a choice that we make, when we are courageous and have an openness to being transformed and accept a new way of living. Though the text this morning speaks of baptism as a means of declaring our faith, it is not the only way. Some of us worshipping here this morning, whether in person or online, may not be baptized or may have chosen not to be baptized for a plethora of reasons, it does not mean that God does not extend gratitude to those unbaptized. Quite the contrary. If we see baptism as an outward expression of our faith, then that means that there are also inward ways that we express our faith. I believe that when we are intentional and desire a way of living that is living in relationship with God, whether it is for the first time or whether it is a renewed relationship - this is what affords us the opportunity to be transformed with a baptism of the Holy Spirit. This changing of heart, or repentance as John refers to it as brings us to making strides to make our way to God and in turn being the hope for the world, including for the next stranger that we may meet upon our path.

You may be wondering; however, do we go about making strides to make our way to God? It is by doing so with a grateful heart! Brenée Brown defined gratitude in her book, *An Atlas of the Heart*, as "...an emotion that reflects our deep appreciation for what we value, what brings meaning to our lives, and what makes us feel connected to ourselves and others." Embracing with a grateful heart that we have a God in our life who is loving, accepting, inclusive and forgiving enables us to participate more wholly in a life led by a desire to be in communion with God.

Yet, there are times in life when we struggle to have a grateful heart. At times, it is hard to see the blessings that God is bestowing or has bestowed on us when we are shrouded in darkness. If we are being truly honest, it is hard to feel grateful when it feels as if God is remaining veiled to us during moments of worry, of pain, when we are afraid or grieving. When life challenges us, and it most certainly will, it is downright difficult to turn toward God with a grateful heart and acknowledge the blessings in our life when we or a loved one receives an unexpected health diagnosis, when there is

abuse of any kind, when there's grief though a loss regardless of what kind of loss, whether it be a loss of a job, an end of a marriage, loss of a family home through death or even remarriage. It is hard to turn to God in moments such as these and others that have remained unnamed and to be grateful for the blessings in our life at such moments. From time-to-time, many of us have questioned where is God, where is this God that is with us all the time, when we find ourselves in our own sort of wilderness. We feel as Jesus does, alone, tempted and crying out for a glimpse of the One who remains veiled.

So, for one to feel and to come to know gratitude - we must also be able to practice it. This is indeed a task not for the faint of heart. It is work; at times it may prove to be quite difficult. It calls for us to be intentional; to harness the desire to be in relationship with God. To be ready to boldly accept a change in our heart and to welcome a transformation of self. It requires us to be like Jesus and to step into life with two feet, ready to meet the challenges of what it means to live life differently, to be moved to share God's love and to be willing to truly see the stranger before us. It means embracing a new way of seeing life. It is acknowledging that living out our baptism or living out our faith is having acknowledged a change of heart of how we choose to lead our lives, a decision to strive to follow a new way of living or a desire to live a Godly life. It is not trying to be perfect, it is simply a way of practicing this changed way of life: by trying, by failing, and by trying again.

By sharing and celebrating the goodness or the blessings found in our life is sharing the light of God with others. Gratitude does not erase our trials, nor is it meant to trivialize our experiences, it simply provides us with an opportunity to return to a place in our heart where we see and come to know that God is always with us. We heard this morning when Jesus came out of the water, that the Spirit descended like a dove upon him. The descent of the Spirit as a dove implies that the Spirit was visible and made known unto Jesus. The scripture passage reminds us that God gives each of us signs along the way so that we may come to know that we are on the right path and that we do not travel alone. When we attune ourselves with God and come to recognize the signs before us, as being just that - signs from God - it becomes easier to know that we are following our path - toward God. It is by acknowledging these signs, these blessings that allow us to come to see the presence of God and how truly blessed we are.

When leaving this place this morning, may we be reminded of our baptism, whether it was an outward or inward expression of faith, that we are a beloved child of God, and have accepted to strive to live in a way that fosters an openness of heart, to be a beacon of hope for the ones that come after us. With the presence of the Spirit upon us or before us, regardless of seeing our sign from God was something other than that of being a dove - may it be understood - that this is a sign, uniquely intended for us - that God is pleased and gives thanks - for all of us. Go forth on a path of a transformative faith, ready to offer hope, to shine God's light and love to those we meet and know that this is something that we can be truly grateful for! Amen.