

Sermon for the First Sunday after the Epiphany  
January 10, 2021 Yr B  
St. Michael's Episcopal Church  
The Reverend Canon Michael J. Horvath  
Gospel: Mark 1:4-11

The great poet Maya Angelou once said "When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time." This past week, the security and safety of the seat of our nation's representative power was compromised by extremists at the instigation of the person who swore an executive oath to uphold the safety and integrity of the United States and its government. Bishop Marian Budde of the Diocese of Washington DC said, "Mr. President...[y]ou called your supporters to our Capitol. You fed their wild fantasies and conspiracy theories. You whipped them into a frenzy. This is not acceptable."

The president and his supporters showed us their anger; they showed us their taste for destruction; they showed us their disrespect for the democratic process; they showed us their preference for division, rather than reconciliation; they showed us their faces full of hate, rather than compassion; they showed us their unbridled acceptance of racism, with some adorning themselves with the Confederate flag and sweatshirts that read "Camp Auschwitz". They showed us who they are, and we must believe them this first time and every time. We must believe that evil still has a pervasive grip on the weak-spirited, and that Satan's works manifest themselves in our world around us in no uncertain terms.

Today we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord, and Mark's Gospel presents us with two people who show us who they are. Do we believe them the first time? It may seem odd that we were just celebrating the birth of baby Jesus and, about the same time, his cousin John. We meet them again today and they are adults. John the Baptizer, as he has come to be known, is proclaiming the coming of the Lord and urging people to repent. He must have been rather successful, because the gospel says "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." The reality of John's success has to be two-fold, surely. First, John had to have embodied what he was preaching. He had to believe that he was in need of repentance in order to communicate this profound truth with others. Second, the crowds of people who came to be baptized had to have a great amount of humility to, in fact, repent and then be subject to the ritual washing. Who of us wants to have our faults laid out for us, and then be urged to make a public repudiation of those faults? It's takes a big, broken heart held together with humility. John and his followers showed us who they were. Dare we believe them the first time?

Amongst the crowds who came to be baptized is Jesus. Until then, we know only of his birth and a visit to the Temple. Yet, like the others, Jesus came to know the full understanding of what it meant to be human and, with great humility, was baptized by John. And, like the others, Jesus is transformed. "And 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. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, both human and divine, is presented to us on the cusp of his earthly ministry. During this earthly ministry, Jesus will live a life marked by compassion, caring, humility, justice, forgiveness, mercy, sacrifice, joy and love. Throughout this ministry we will be reminded that his life was complete only in serving God and others, that being first means being last, that the table of God has room for all, that in seeking we shall find, that in loving one another we fulfill God's greatest wish for us. This is why we call ourselves Christians, because the divine manifested in the equally human Jesus shows us that we, too, can strive to be all these things in order to live into the image ourselves as God's children. Jesus shows himself to us in flesh and blood that will ultimately be broken on the cross for us as the ultimate expression of God's love. Do you believe him the first time? And not just the first time, but every time?

If you can imagine yourself sitting down across from Jesus, who and what do you see? This is not a throwaway question, but perhaps the most essential question you can ask yourself because it asks us how deep our relationships with Jesus and God are. And just like any healthy relationship, our answer will depend on how much effort we have put into cultivating a relationship with God. We don't have to search for God to have this relationship. God is ever present to us and all we need to do is open ourselves up to God's presence. Thomas Merton says, "No natural exercise can bring you into vital contact with [God]. Unless [God] utters himself in you, speaks his name in the center of your soul, you will no more know him than a stone knows the ground upon which it rests..." In other words, it is up to us to determine how much we want to open ourselves up to God and to embody the life of Christ. In fully understanding God, we come to fully understand ourselves, who are made in God's image. In nurturing a deep relationship with God, we can move towards creating deep relationships with others who are also made in God's image. To deny such a relationship with God, to distance ourselves from the life of Christ, means that we do not believe what they show us to be true and holy.

Saying we should deepen our relationship with God is one thing, knowing how we can do this, both as individuals and as a faith community, is another. Spiritual growth takes work, but it is not a mystery and there are no special handshakes you need to know.

Many of you participated in the Renewal Works Survey findings discussion last Sunday. One of the findings of our spiritual vitality survey was that 82% of you who took the survey said that you are just starting on your spiritual journey, or that you are committed to your faith but still have a lot of questions. What that says to me is that almost all of us at St. Michael's want to open our hearts more to God. There's a lot of room for spiritual growth in this community. That's fabulous! Perhaps that's the journey you want to take with us this year? If so, we're going to provide you with the opportunities to do so. Some have expressed a great desire to study the Bible more, while many of you are ready to become more active in the community (especially once we are able to be physically close to one another again), and even more expressed

wanting to deepen your prayer life. If any of these things resonate with you, then St. Michael's is here for you to explore any or all of those things. That is why we are here isn't it?

I'm not big on New Year Resolutions, or saying that I "should" do something. I don't need to say "I should have a deeper relationship with God" because God already has a deep relationship with me if only I turn towards it. I don't need to say "I should have more of a prayer life" because God already breathes a prayer through me and all I need do is respond to God's prayer with my own. We cannot run away from God's presence, but we can turn more fully towards it. "Our discovery of God is, in a way, God's discovery of us", Merton says.

I am broken-hearted by the events that unfolded last week, but my spirit is not broken. I know that the goodness of Christ, the God-ness in which image I am made, is the light we're called to shine upon these dark shadows cast our way. Perhaps you see this too when you look upon Jesus rising from the River Jordan – a face of love and justice, peace and compassion. If that's what you see, then believe him the first time and every time.

I'll end with words from Presiding Bishop Michael Curry which he gave to the Church after the attack on the Capitol: "With malice toward none, with charity toward all. With firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right. Let us strive to finish the work, the work that we are in. To bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan. To do all which may achieve and cherish, a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

God love you. God bless you. And may God hold us all in those almighty hands of love." Amen.