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**Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ**

Defining Moments

*A Sermon by*

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Scripture: Mark 1:4-11

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 God is still speaking,

Happy New Year. Happy Epiphany. Happy almost Super Bowl party with the Arizona Cardinals! From our lips to God's ears. Happy P.F. Chang half-marathon, run yesterday for me, finishing one week and one day ahead of the crowd (on a day when I could run it).

Last weekend I took a mini-vacation. Many months ago, my brother-in-law Steve wrote and said that Terry, the baby of the family, was turning 50 and he wanted to throw her a surprise birthday party. Would we come to northern New Jersey in January? Where else would I want to be, actually? Terry, the youngest of the four Nelson children, has said to Steve throughout their almost thirty years of marriage that she has never in her whole life had a birthday party! I find this hard to believe, but babies of the family always get their way, right? Her logic is that it was January, right after Christmas, Daddy's birthday was January 12<sup>th</sup>, her's the 15<sup>th</sup>, Mom's the 31<sup>st</sup>. It was January in western New York growing up, and how do you have a party with friends when there is a good chance there will be a blizzard? Hence, a surprise party, which she found out about in the last few days. Still it was fun, to get together as brother and three sisters, to share stories, to remember, to reconnect our very different lives. Terry has been the one in the family who has done the genealogy work, tracing back the Nelson, McCoy, Eggleston, Ekkert family histories. With both mom and dad now gone, we found ourselves piecing together the stories, trying to fill in the holes, wishing our parents had told us more (or that we had listened better), or written their stories down. We all carry similar but different memories and information, and it is hard to know what the 'truth' is.

So it is with our Gospel of 'truth' today. It is the story of the baptism of Jesus from Mark's Gospel, a story that is different in each of the other three Gospels. For Mark's Gospel it is the inaugural event for Jesus. People hearing this first chapter must already have known who Jesus was. People must have known who John was. The inaugural story begins with Jesus, coming to John, and Jesus having a powerful religious experience.

We visited the site perhaps described in today's reading. We had stayed in Ammon, Jordan, and in the morning headed down, literally down, below sea level, toward the Dead Sea and the river Jordan, to Bethany-beyond-Jordan. The Jordanian site has only recently been developed for it was a 'disputed territory' between Jordan and Israel, was filled with land mines, until a 1994 peace treaty gave new life to the region and the area was cleared of mines so that archaeological work, and tourist money, could begin. Since 1996, as many as 20 churches have been uncovered, as well as numerous caves of monks and hermits, ruins of monasteries and pilgrims' lodges, and plaster lined baptismal pools dating from Roman and Byzantine times.<sup>1</sup> Something happened in that area for a very long time.

You walk down a path through a tropical thicket area, thick with reeds, willows and tamarisk trees, fed by springs in an area which, up until about a mile or so away, looked desolate, dead-looking, desert area. The Jordan River appears as a little muddy stream, the majority of the water drawn off upstream by both Israel and Jordan. You can almost touch Israel on the other side. The Jordanians say the Israelis take all the water. The Israelis say the Jordanians take all the water. You can easily see how another disputed territory like Gaza, on the other side of Israel, is also a tinderbox, not easily solved, and we pray, along with others, for peace, for justice, for people to be able to live their lives without the shadow of terror. President of the United Church of Christ John Thomas reminds us in a pastoral letter that "There are in Gaza many Palestinian Christians who bear witness to nonviolent resistance even in the midst of this bitter Occupation."<sup>2</sup>

Bitter Occupation would also describe the times when John was baptizing and the times when the Gospel of Mark was written. The winners write history and so we know little about John. He was a relative of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.sacred-destinations.com/jordan/bethany-baptism-site.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ucc.org/middle-east/collegium-gaza-statement.html>

Jesus, Elizabeth's mother was Mary's mother's sister. John's father Zechariah was a priest of the order of Abijah, one of the twenty four divisions assigned by King David to serve in the temple. Each division would minister to God for eight days, from Sabbath to Sabbath.<sup>3</sup> It was while Zechariah was on his temple duty, Luke says, that Zechariah was visited by same angel Gabriel as Mary, and told he would have a son. When Elizabeth and Zechariah went to the temple on the eighth day of their baby's life, Zechariah named him John as the angel spoke.

We imagine John was raised in the temple, but his parents were elderly. When they died, did John continue in the Temple? Did he join another community of priests? Did he, like most teenagers, stop going to church, grow his hair long, and wear clothes that would have made his parents roll in their graves? Six months older than Jesus, we do not hear about John again until we learn that he has a following. People are coming to hear him from all over the Judean countryside and from Jerusalem. John is preaching about 'a way', a new way, and people are listening, flocking to him. They are filling up the Washington Mall from the Capital to the Lincoln Memorial. They are coming by the busloads, young and old, black and white. They know something new is about to happen.

It has to happen. When Mark writes his Gospel it is 70 CE (Common Era). The Roman Occupiers have re-conquered Jerusalem, and the Temple has been destroyed. Gospel Mark says to the desolate people, "There is a way through this wilderness. Do not forget the one named Jesus who showed us a way. Jesus stood up to all that tore people down. Jesus stood up even in the face of death. Even death led to new life. When we follow his way, we will be reborn, and God, God will be pleased."

Mark writes and speaks his Gospel to comfort the people in their time of loss and to re-energize them to continue on the 'way', the 'way' of bringing about the 'dream of God'.

Marcus Borg calls this the role of a prophet. While we may have learned that prophets were predictors of the future, Borg names a prophet as more 1) someone who comforts the people, and 2) renews their energy to build the 'dream of God', the way of justice and peace.

You are a prophet when you comfort, when you listen to a friend's pain. In this crazy, rush-rush, text message world, what does it mean to sit down, hold a hand, lend an ear, and listen? You are a prophet when you say, sometimes without saying a word, "You are not alone. You are cared about. You can make it through this. Others have. You will. There is a way."

You are a prophet when you move from, "Oh boy, here it comes. All the pain. I can't fix it. I want to fix it. What will I do if I can't fix it?...to "I'm not being asked to fix it...I'm listening. I am there for you. We both come out of this stronger."

A prophet's work begins with comfort and moves to energy.

"People, we are one. What will we do together that we might not do by ourselves?" Build a Habitat house. Sign up at the Welcome Tent. Welcome people from Nicaragua. Next Thursday through Monday, three people come to us and thank us for what we began last summer on a mission trip. They long for clean water and medical care and jobs and justice just like we long for these basic human rights. Come and learn how you might get involved, including going summer 2009.

A prophet renews energy, and I wish you could have seen the Youth Center last Wednesday evening when senior highs were working with Lee Case to rebuild countertops in those aging bathrooms. It was teacher-learners, master-apprentices, giving-receiving-giving back. Our kids have figured out that church is 'doing': the dirtier their hands get, the better.

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<sup>3</sup><http://doig.net/NTC07.htm>

Those welcome slips we ask you to fill out week after week, when new people come in, and they do come every week to every service, they usually check the box that says, "I want to know more about service." As they join, they say, "I want to serve. I want to know more about helping others."

I don't think I have ever gotten one of those forms back (maybe I have seen one), which said, "I just want to sit in church and be left alone. Entertain me. I don't want to meet anyone. I don't want to be noticed."

Instead the welcome slips come back, "connect me" "teach me" "use my gifts" "stretch me even outside my comfort zones." "Be my touchstone so that I know I am really on the way."

Most of what I do, and Pastor Ted and Pastor David do, these days we never learned in seminary. If you had told me a hundred years ago when I went to seminary, that on the Baptism of Jesus Sunday, I would be baptizing a family who escaped their occupied, civil war land, I would have to say, like John said, "I am preparing the Way."

If you had said to be I would be pasturing a church which opened its doors yesterday to an Ethiopian Coptic Church for their worship, last night to a Dignity Catholic gay and lesbian congregation, this afternoon to a Hispanic congregation, last month to a revival of Korean congregations weekend, I would have to say like John, "I prepare the Way."

If you had said to me I would be pastoring a congregation that could be open enough to welcome all the people, I would have to say like John, "I prepare the Way."

I believe we are on the Way, and God is pleased. Even in difficult times for many, we continue to comfort and to renew. Just like Mark's Gospel, there is urgency. "Now is the time, God's time, for God's dream of justice and peace to come true. We will not give up the dream."

Thanks be to God. Amen.