

A New Beginning...

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Translated by Mrs. Vivian Yee (simultaneous translation)
in an All Church Bilingual Communion Service
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Berkeley Chinese Community Church, UCC
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Genesis 1:1-5

¹In the beginning when God created* the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God* swept over the face of the waters. ³Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Mark 1:4-11

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.'



Today's gospel reading included "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." When we hear those words read in church, we know that we are in the season after Epiphany. Epiphany was yesterday - January 6th - when the wise men supposedly arrived in Bethlehem, and the first Sunday after Epiphany is always the Baptism of Christ.

This is the first time Jesus appears in the Gospel of Mark, the oldest of the Gospels. There's also Matthew, Luke and John. Did you notice that each gospel has a different kind of beginning? Matthew begins with Jesus' roots – with genealogy...with ancestors & lineage. Luke begins with Jesus' birth, the events leading up to his birth and its impact. Mark begins with Jesus' baptism....there is no Christmas story...Jesus just appears out of nowhere as an adult. Incidentally – the gospel of John first mentions Jesus when he arrives to be baptized by John the Baptist.



Can you Imagine how different December would have been if Luke and Matthew had not written their stories of family roots and birth? No Mary, no Joseph, no baby Jesus, no shepherds, no wise men, no little town of Bethlehem. None of that!?! We probably wouldn't celebrate Christmas at all if we didn't have those stories. Can you imagine? No Christmas pageant, no advent wreath? No Christmas Tree?

What if our very first story about Jesus was his baptism by John in the Jordan River? We probably would have made a big deal out of it – maybe have a huge annual festival called Baptis'-MAS.



The celebrations would most likely involve water! We would sing songs about “dreaming of a wet Baptis'mas”. We would take kids to water parks set up in malls all over the country with



dunking water games that set doves free as a rumbling voice announces, “You are my Beloved!”



Shoppers would be greeted not by Santa, but by John the Baptist who would offer BaptisMas snacks of locusts and honey!

But OUR reality is that the baptism of Jesus is anti-climatic...the Christmas celebrations are over...poinsettias are looking droopy...the fabulous Christmas Eve service is just a memory...the Christmas tree will be gone soon...and the decorations will be back in storage boxes.



But for Jesus? His baptism was a big deal...a life-changing experience. It is a new beginning for him – the beginning of his ministries. As he's coming up out of the water of the Jordan River everyone hears the voice of God saying: "You are my son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased."



This announcement ushered in *this* new beginning. For Jesus - His work...his miracles...it was all beginning!

And for thousands of years...people's lives will change...will know new beginnings....because of Jesus. People will experience new beginnings with their own baptism...when they commit to putting God/Jesus/the Holy Spirit first in their lives. A new beginning like this can take us to unexpected places doing unexpected and surprising things....when the only explanation we have is "Jesus put us there."

Listen to this story shared by Duke Divinity School Professor William Willimon. He was in the inner city and walked into a church that serves breakfast every morning of the week to 150 homeless folks a day. He was there to help along with volunteers from other churches in the area. In the kitchen he noticed someone he'd met before...a member of one of the city's most affluent congregations. Willimon was surprised to see a man like him, from a church like his, washing the dirty dishes of people who were homeless.



Willimon told the man, "I think it's great that you're here." The man mumbled, "I'm glad you think it's great," not looking up from his dishwater.

Willimon asked him, "I'm curious, have you always enjoyed ministry to the homeless?" The man looked up. "Who said that I enjoyed this? Frankly, I mostly can't stand the homeless people that I've met here." "Really?" Willimon said.

The man continued, "Have you sat down and talked with our guests here? A lot of them are homeless for a reason. A lot of them are half crazy."

"Well, I guess that makes it all the more remarkable that you're here washing dishes for them." Willimon responded and then asked the man, "So, why are you here?"

He looked up from his work and said with resignation, "Because Jesus put me here, that's why." And then he kept washing dishes.

Jesus puts us places we don't want to go. Jesus puts us in situations and circumstances, crossroads and confrontations, conflicts and contexts we don't want to be in. And someone who notices where we

are in those moments might think it's great. But if we're honest, it doesn't always feel like it's great.

Someone might say, "I think it's great that you're here to forgive that person." But do we really feel like it's great?

- "I think it's great that you're here to pledge some of your money to the mission of this church."
- "I think it's great that you're here at this retirement home visiting with the elderly, especially since I know how places like this make you uncomfortable."
- "I think it's great that you're here to be the overnight host at the church for our families that are presently homeless."
- "I think it's great that you're here in church this morning."

Would our response be...

"I'm glad you think it's great, but you know Jesus put me here."

Can you think of a time when you were invited...

- to do something that you really didn't want to do,
- or you were invited to go somewhere that you really didn't want to go to,
- or you were invited into a situation that you wanted no part of,
- and you accepted the invitation anyway?

and somewhere along the way,

- maybe in the moment,
- maybe after the fact,
- maybe years down the road,

you were able to look back and, from a transformed perspective, say, "That was great. I'm glad I was there"?



There might be something to this journey of faith where Jesus places us in different situations...



that we might be transformed over time by those very situations to become closer to the child of God that God is hoping for.

If God's plan, God's great shalom, is that everything would return to God, be reconciled to God,

- then God's plan for us sounds less like us needing to be saviors for others
- and more like we need to let God's salvation change **us** from the inside out so we can *really* follow Jesus' command to love one another as we love ourselves....
- the ministry of reconciliation.

How is the affluent man washing dishes ever supposed to see a person who is homeless as Christ if he can't bring his heart to love? Remember? If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not

have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. **That's** the Shalom that God's up to in our life of faith.

Consider Jonah – the guy that God sends to a place called Nineveh to preach repentance to the Ninevites so that they will change their ways and be saved.



That's not much to ask...all Jonah has to do is preach a one-sentence sermon to the Ninevites: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." But, of course, when God tells Jonah to do this, Jonah runs. Why? Jonah runs because he can't stand the Ninevites! Israel was called to be a light to the nations...the Assyrians have been humiliating the Israelites for years with defeat after defeat, and Nineveh is the capital of Assyria! What Jew in their right mind would want to waste even one breath on those despicable people in Nineveh?

Of course, Jonah didn't want to go over there and talk to those people in Nineveh - he despised them! He'd rather God go over there and wipe them out instead. That's the same way Jews felt about Gentiles in Jesus' day, and after those first disciples dropped their nets to follow Jesus, where do you think he led them? To the Gentiles.



When Jesus recruited the fishermen, he said "Follow me and I'll make you fishers of people." I wonder, if Jesus had said, "Follow me and I'll take you to the Gentiles where we'll share God's love with them, too"...would they have followed him?



Someone once said, "I think that the world will not be converted to the heavenly hope of Christianity if first Christianity does not convert itself to the hope of the world." And what does the world hope for right now? What do our children watching us and how we treat each other and this earth hope for right now? It's probably Peace...Equality...

- Gentleness and good stewardship toward this earth.
- For people of different faiths and nationalities to listen to and learn from one another.
- For people of different sexual identities and family make-ups to be in community with each other.
- For this "love of God" thing that we preach and teach in our houses of worship to not be hypocritically left in the sanctuary after Sunday service.
- For the institutions of racism to crumble.
- For immigrants to be embraced and treated with compassion.

Sounds like a hopeful journey to me. It's a journey that transforms us over time, and that journey is determined by where Jesus puts us. It all starts with a heart open to a new beginning.



Listen to this story from the Civil Rights movement: In March of 1965, women and men were marching across the Edmund Pettus Bridge from Selma to Montgomery.



It was a peaceful march advocating for the voting rights of African Americans. A sheriff named Jim Clark met the marchers with billy clubs and dogs. In that very moment, a young minister among the marchers called out, “Do you love Martin Luther King?” The crowd responded with determination, “Certainly, Lord!” Again the voice cried out, “Do you love Martin Luther King?” The marchers responded, “Certainly, Lord!” And again, the young minister said, “Do you love Martin Luther King?” The marchers responded enthusiastically, “Certainly, certainly, certainly, Lord!”

They kept marching. And then the same young minister called out, “Do you love Jim Clark?” Silence. He called out again, “Do you love Jim Clark?” This time a few muffled voices responded, “Certainly, Lord.” And a third time the young minister cried out, “Do you love Jim Clark?” The point began to sink in and the marchers finally responded, “Certainly, certainly, certainly, Lord.” It was not enough to defeat Jim Clark. The marchers needed Jim Clark to convert from hate to love, but that couldn’t happen without them first loving him, seeing him in a different light—inner change to make worldly change. A New Beginning!

Jesus puts **us** places so that change can happen from the inside out in ourselves AND in others. The United Church of Christ Statement of Faith says that we “accept the cost and the joy of discipleship.”

- The cost? letting our guard down and giving up all that running away from God’s expansive love.
- The joy? being ushered into a kingdom on earth as in heaven where all belong to one another and to this God who loves us equally and without reservation.

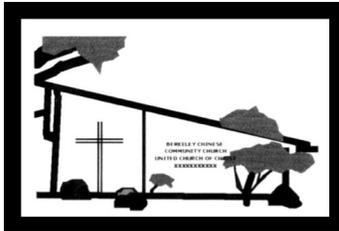
You might remember that I had been reluctantly following Jesus for a long time before becoming a pastor. And that journey of faith has put me in a lot of strange places. Jesus put me here at BCCC! I joke with you often about how I never thought in my wildest dreams that I’d ever be an ordained Christian minister. I had always been uncomfortable around Christians.



But I thank God that Jesus put me in God's church, because being here has changed me...it has shaped my faith, and it has empowered me to love myself and to love others in expansive ways that I wasn't able to when I first started life as a baptized Christian. My goodness – I was a hypocrite! I didn't really like Christians – they were the people who told me I couldn't be Chinese and Christian at the same time...that I couldn't be me and be a child of God! I didn't want to be Christian!



But then I had children. I wanted them to have something I didn't have – and that was a background in the Judeo-Christian traditions. I figured that would help them be better students – so much of art, literature, and music taught in schools was rooted in the language and traditions of Judaism and Christianity. I always felt that my friends who were “religious” had an advantage academically. So, for my kids...I was baptized; my children were baptized. My husband was already baptized. It was a new beginning – life as a “Christian”! Even though my motives were questionable...God took even **this** new beginning and worked with it! Frankly, for most of my life I had never felt comfortable in all Chinese settings. So where does Jesus put me? In a **Chinese** Church! And then I was transformed & followed Jesus much closer than I ever imagined...as an ordained UCC minister! AND it's great! Go figure!



So, the good news I want to share with us this morning is just this: “I’m glad that Jesus put you here. I think it’s great that you are here.” You’re here today – to be a voice in this congregation as we meet to make some important decisions about this particular church of God. Jesus put you here! And because of it – a new beginning will happen – let go and let God!



Let us pray...

Loving God, It has been said that “the mystery of ministry is that we have been chosen to make our own limited and very conditional love the conduit for the unlimited and unconditional love of God.” Thank you for new beginnings by taking **our** conditional, limited lives and putting us in places where our anxiousness and urgency, fear and doubt, judgments and reservations can give way to the transformative power of your unlimited, unconditional love. Thank you for using us to help bring about a new beginning to this world with one act of love at a time. May this new beginning start with us this day. In the name of Jesus who started all this with his baptism! Amen.