

Arise, Shine

Luke 3:1-22

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First Central Congregational UCC

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“New life starts in the dark.” Barbara Brown Taylor, retired Episcopal priest, professor, and popular writer, wrote that. She continued, “Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark.”

Winter is the darkest time of the year in our region of the globe. Dark and cold and largely devoid of color. The bare branches of trees, the ubiquitous white landscape, the gray skies. No wonder many people experience seasonal affective disorders.

Yet, for the calendar of the Christian church—a calendar that largely took shape in more temperate Mediterranean zones—this is the season of light. Light in the midst of darkness is an irony not lost of those of us living in colder, northern latitudes.

Tuesday the season of Christmastide ended with Twelfth Night, and Wednesday was Epiphany. Once, Epiphany was the major holiday this time of year; Christmas day only gained that ascendancy in recent centuries. And there are still regions of the world where Epiphany is dominate, such as in the Ethiopian church, for example.

What does Epiphany celebrate? This feast and its accompanying season celebrate Jesus made manifest as the Christ, as God’s agent for salvation. If the Nativity story emphasizes the human side of Jesus, the Epiphany stories highlight revelations of divinity.

Traditionally three stories have been tied to this celebration. One is the visit of the Magi, bringing gifts to the child Jesus, recorded in the Gospel of Matthew. Another is the wedding at Cana in which, according to the Gospel of John, Jesus performs his first miracle, turning water into wine. The other is the story of the baptism, recorded variously in four canonical gospels. Today, being Baptism of the Christ Sunday, we focus on the baptism, as recorded in the Gospel of Luke. And as is our annual tradition, we renew our baptismal vows, a great way to recommit ourselves as disciples at the dawn of each new year.

So, on this cold, wintry day, in the midst of our darkest season, let’s look for the light illuminating in our lives the new, saving work of God.

Popular blogger Rachel Held Evans wrote in her latest book, *Searching for Sunday*, that John the Baptist is “basically . . . the guy you’d avoid bumping into in the Walmart parking lot.”

John is the voice, crying in the wilderness, preparing the way for God’s messiah. He’s calling for repentance, for a new start. Symbolized by drawing the people out into the wilderness, where the Exodus journey occurred. And by baptizing them in the Jordan River, symbolizing a new entry into the Promised Land.

But this repentance isn’t cheap grace. What John expects is a demanding ethics. We must bear worthy fruit. We must share with the needy. We must be fair. We mustn’t take more than what we deserve. For God is winnowing out the chaff, exposing and removing our

sins, purifying us with an unquenchable fire.

Evans writes of John the Baptist's message:

God was coming to the people. . . . Temples could not contain a God who flattens mountains, or ceremonial baths a God who flows through rivers. Repentance, then, meant reorienting one's life around this reality. It meant repenting of the old ways of obstruction and joining in the great paving of the path, in the demolishing of every man-made impediment between God and God's people, and in the celebrating of God's wild, uninhibited presence filling every corner of the earth.

And, so, Jesus comes to be baptized, setting a pattern for all of us, who come to this font to be initiated into the work of God. At our baptism so many things occur. We repent and are forgiven of our sins. We are incorporated into the body of Christ, the church. We are given a name and marked by Jesus, an identity that will help us to know who we are as we journey through life. We are part of the family, acknowledged as a beloved child of God, and immediately connected with a vast army of surrogate grandmas and grandpas, aunts and uncles, cousins and friends. And we join in the great adventure of God, fighting evil and oppression, becoming our best selves, and making the world a better place. A lot happens in those few beautiful moments.

The importance of baptism to the life of the church is one reason our Worship Ministry wanted to create a baptismal font that was more visible and attracted people's attention, so that every day we might call to mind the rich meanings of our baptism. And, as I said the day we commissioned this new bowl, that we might also be touched by the refining and purifying fire of God, symbolized by the fire that made this bowl.

Baptism is about new life.

During my stays at Yale University the last two summers, I've visited the museum where, among other things, is a fascinating exhibit of the archaeological finds from Dura-Europos, a site in modern day Syria. That dig provided many insights into ancient culture, particularly early Christian communities of the Near East. I admired some of the early Christian frescoes, drawn to what scholars had pointed out was some of the earliest Christian imagery. Our forbears created images of Jesus as shepherd, rather than the later dominant images of crucifixion or Christ the King. The shepherd fresco was one of a series that covered the walls of the community's baptistery. Another illustrated the story of the woman at well, when Jesus talked about being living water.

Rachel Held Evans writes about these frescoes in her book and about what archaeologists have discovered about those earliest baptismal ceremonies. I quote:

Nearly two thousand years [ago], on Easter morning just before the sun rose, flickering lamplight would have illuminated the drawings as new converts to Christianity kneeled, stark naked, in the water of the baptistery. One by one, the men separated from the women, each publicly affirmed the tenets of the faith and renounced Satan and his demons before being submerged three times in the cold water—in the name of

the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

. . . Converts were given white robes to signify their new life in Christ and anointed with oil, marking them as members of the royal priesthood. They then joined their fellow believers to celebrate the eucharistic meal for the first time.

After that description of the ancient ceremony, Evans reflects:

These days, most churches don't begin their Resurrection Sunday service with a bunch of wet, naked people renouncing Satan and his demons at six o'clock in the morning. Such an approach would draw far fewer visitors than elaborate passion plays or Easter egg hunts Yet, historically, the Christian life began with the acknowledgment of two uncomfortable realities—evil and death—and in baptism, the Christian makes the audacious claim that neither one gets the final word.

In the darkness, new life. In the face of sin and injustice, repentance and a new social order. Faced with violence, we bring peace. With despair, hope. With sorrow, joy. With hatred, love.

Evans concludes,

In the ritual of baptism, our ancestors acted out the bizarre truth of the Christian identity: We are people who stand totally exposed before evil and death and declare them powerless against love. There's nothing normal about that.

So, at the dawn of this new year, in the midst of winter cold and darkness, I invite you to Arise, Shine, for your light is come.