

To Begin Again

Baptism of the Lord Sunday

Mark 1:4-11
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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Today is the first Sunday in the liturgical church season of Epiphany. "Epiphany" is a word that literally means an "appearance" or "manifestation." It has also come to mean any moment of great or sudden revelation or realization. We often refer to these as "ah-ha" moments. In a biblical context, however, it basically refers to when someone recognizes the Presence of God in Jesus of Nazareth. For instance, on the day of Epiphany, January 6 (the 12th day of Christmas), the church reads the story of the three magi, commemorating the recognition of the manifestation of the Sacred Presence of God in the Christ child, Jesus.

On the first Sunday of Epiphany, the assigned lectionary gospel reading, whether from Matthew, Mark, or Luke, is always the story of Jesus' baptism. It is categorized as an epiphany story for the same reason, "And just as Jesus 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'" (Mark 1:10-11, NRSV).

I usually use the occasion of the Baptism of the Lord Sunday to reflect upon the various understandings of baptism in our Presbyterian tradition, known as Reformed theology. As important as that is, I want to go in a different direction this morning. And the jumping off point is just one particular element of an understanding of baptism. **Our baptism functions somewhat as an initiation into the family of God, marking a starting point and a new beginning.** It's not a coincidence that this Baptism of the Lord Sunday comes at the beginning of each New Year.

Even though January 1 is simply another day, the one that follows December 31, there is something special and symbolic in the turning of the yearly calendar. Yes, we still bring with us all we have been and done into the new year, but there is also a strong desire in most people to seek a way to begin again. As kids playing games, we simply declared, "Do over!" But is it really possible to clean the slate and make a new start? Christianity declares, YES, thanks to God's forgiving love and grace. But fresh starts are challenging because we are working with the same person who was part of the past – ourselves. **It has been shown that it is difficult to leave the past behind because somehow it is comfortable in that we grow accustomed to behaving and responding in familiar ways, whether they are healthy or not.** But yes, fresh starts are possible. And it begins, as you might expect, with some serious reflection.

In this month's Word from the Pastor newsletter article I shared a metaphor that you have heard me use before, and just demonstrated during the Time With the Children this morning. It concerns a backpack. It goes like this. **Each of us carries around a backpack, metaphorically, filled with all the events, thoughts and feeling of the past year. Think of what you carry around in your backpack.** Then ask yourself, what would I like to take out of my backpack and leave behind as I journey into this new year? In other words, **what would be beneficial to your body, mind and spirit to let go?**

Then ask yourself, what would I like to continue to carry with me in my backpack as I journey into this new year? In other words, **what qualifies, people, activities and other things do you want to keep around you, that which has been be beneficial to your body, mind and spirit.**

Finally, ask yourself, what would I like to add to my backpack as I journey into this new year? In other words, **what do I need to do differently in my life in order to benefit my body, mind and spirit?** You may also want to ask: How do I want to feel? Who do I want to be? What do I want to create?

In the waning days of last year, **Bishop Carlton Pearson**, associated with All Souls Unitarian Church here in town, sent out an email detailing how each January he initiates a deliberate personal, **physical, mental and spiritual detox**. He's done so each year for over 40 years.

Now, I understand a **physical detox**, primarily through a change in eating habits, exercise and enough sleep - anything that is more beneficial to the body. In fact, since my week-long visit after Christmas to my healthy-eating and exercising brother and sister-in-law in Denver (I guess that describes almost everyone living in Denver), I've come home and fixed a healthy fruit and vegetable smoothie each and every day. But in order to do that, I realized that I needed to change where I shop for groceries. Going a bit out of the way and giving up a bit of convenience for healthier eating habits has now become a priority in my efforts to begin again. That, for instance, is something I choose to add to my backpack.

I was especially intrigued, however, in Carlton's email by the idea of a **mental and spiritual detox**. So, here's the important question. **What have you been putting into your mind, your feelings, and your spirit that is toxic?** Speaking personally, I immediately thought of my obsession with following the fallout of every tweet from our President. For many of us, if not all of us, **constant negative stimulation is toxic and dangerous to our mental and spiritual well-being**. So that, for instance, is something I have chosen to take out of my backpack.

To help us all in this regard, let us try to **keep focus on what really matters in life. Let us not allow ourselves to become too distracted by the latest shiny object**. Carlton Pearson encourages, "Let's make some new and better personal choices that will affect and enhance the rest of our lives on the planet and in this plane of consciousness."

As you know, for the past few years I have particularly emphasized the reality that the Sacred Presence of God dwells within each and every one of us, and within all of creation. But there's a next step to that realization. In his *Daily Meditation* post from his website, Center for Action and Contemplation, **Richard Rohr** posted just this week something very helpful in this regard. He writes:

We already and always have the divine image (*imago Dei*) within us; but we hopefully grow into the divine likeness (*similitude*) as we begin to externally resemble the goodness of God. It usually takes us a long time to rediscover what has been true all along as we gradually find our unique way of embodying Love. Finding God and finding our True Self—which is letting go of our false self—are finally the same thing.

Yes, darkness remains. Yet, there is always light in that darkness. The one that you and I, and we together as a community of faith, choose to focus on may make a very big difference in our efforts to grow into the divine likeness, and to begin again.

Amen.