

Baptism of Our Lord. January 10, 2021. Mark 1:3-11.

After the Sacking of the Capitol by White Supremacists and the Racist Brick at L!ve Café.

This week was dominated here by two events: one local and one national. Locally, someone wrapped a brick in racist epithets and threw it at a local black-owned business. This seems to have been a follow-up to the racist challenge against the presence of two black candidates on the ballot for the local elections coming up in April. I think it's important that we see both the specifics and the symbolism of this. Yes, the note was meant to intimidate specifically black candidates on local ballots in the near future. And yes, the brick was thrown at a specific business that has a well-known and well-defined mission in our community. But also, members of this church have been black candidates on local ballots before, many of us have been to L!ve Café for food or for planning, and we all live in a community that fosters this kind of hatred, especially in the high school and in the comment sections of certain facebook groups. The brick was thrown at specific people and at a specific business, *and* it was thrown at all of us. The brick was thrown by a particular coward, who may or may not be the same troglodyte taking direct action to remove black candidates from ballots, *and* it was thrown by all of us if we are a part of making a town where it is more comfortable to be racist than it is to be black.

And nationally, as I'm sure you noticed, the Capitol was sacked by an antisemitic, white supremacist mob at the behest of our white supremacist, lecherous, greedy, grifting president. The Confederate flag, that preeminent symbol of American white supremacy, was paraded through the United States Capitol, while Nazis with white power tattoos and antisemitic t-shirts guffawed their way through a murderous attempt to overthrow the government. Many of us have felt betrayed by politicians before, and some of us have had the misfortune to believe that certain politicians might be the unique answers to the nation's problems. But I don't think that recent years have seen such a bald-faced betrayal by an American politician of their oath of office, or such fervent idolatry by huge swaths of brain-washed, hate-filled people who no longer care for party, community, or nation, but only the depraved symbol of a leader.

There are as many hot takes on the sacking of the Capitol as there are Twitter accounts, and the attack on L!ve Café is the hot topic on all the online forums in town. Our job this morning is not to have the hottest take on these events, but to understand them in the context of our faith, which today remembers the baptism of our Lord and our own baptisms. Inevitably, we ask on this day why Jesus, the sinless incarnate Word of God, was baptized at all. But when we do so, we get the order of our thinking backwards. It is not that Jesus was baptized just like us. Rather, we now are baptized into the baptism, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The meaning of Jesus' baptism is not derived from our baptisms; our baptisms derive their meaning from *his* baptism, life, death, and resurrection.

Jesus was baptized, and then the Spirit immediately drove him into the wilderness where he was tempted before beginning his public ministry. In the gospel of Mark, within three verses of this baptism he has begun his mission, proclaiming the coming of the kingdom of God and building a community dedicated to that mission. This same community, with this same mission,

is what we join at baptism. When we are baptized, it is not just a cute family milestone—it is an initiation into the continuation of the mission of Jesus Christ. In a few minutes, we will reaffirm our commitment to that mission when we renew our Baptismal Covenant.

In the broadest possible terms, Jesus' mission was to reconcile the world to each other and to God. At wiggle worship each week, we put this same idea differently, when we say that Jesus came to teach us how to love, and to show us how much we are loved. He made his home among the lowly, sought out the lost and outcast, healed the sick, and spoke the truth without regard for his own status or popularity. Eventually, he stood before the powers of his world and presented his own life as the truth.

We live in a world where truth is contested. We have seen this week the power of even the most absurd lies, when they find their hook in already existing resentment and anger. Speaking and living the truth, in Jesus' time and in our time, is going to involve us in conflict. Speaking basic truths, like that black and brown people are fully human, created in the image of God and loved by God, will bring us into conflict with other children of God who have given themselves over to captivity to lies. Living Christian truths, like reflecting God's special care for the poor, the lonely, the foreigner, and the sick in our own choices and lives will bring us into conflict with other children of God who live by the fear that care for some must always come at the expense of others. And when the conflict starts, our position becomes more perilous. Because we too are always going to be at risk of the momentum of conflict that can so easily lead us, as easily as rolling downhill, to prize defeating our opponent over speaking the truth in love or defending our beloved siblings.

The Baptismal Covenant can help us here. It calls us to stay in community, to examine our conscience and repent, to keep the proclamation of God's good news in Christ on our lips, to seek Christ in each person (including our enemies), and to strive for justice and peace while respecting the dignity of all people. These are pretty good ground-rules for staying faithful through the end of the social contract. It's not the hottest take, it won't get the most retweets, but it will keep us moving more deeply into the joyful heart of God. I don't know whether it would save America, but as we struggle for racial reconciliation and a just society, it will save us.

I want to close with a final note from the gospel of Mark. I have tried today to speak the truth, and I think that the truth includes some hard words about some of our neighbors, some of our rulers, and some of our fellow Americans. If we follow the truth far enough it also, of course, always includes some hard words about us, too. We'll speak some of those in our general confession in a few moments. But I don't want us to forget as we speak the truth or try our best to, that the mission of Jesus Christ begins and remains firmly rooted in the love of God. Jesus is baptized and the heavens are torn open, in remarkably expressive and violent language, but they are torn open because God wants to say, "You are my Son, the Beloved." This week made me want to tear some things apart. I bet it made you want to do the same. When God tears things apart, they are the things that are getting in the way of love. May we do the same. Amen.