



“Defining Moments”

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Hayward, California***

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Mk. 1:4-11 (NRSV)***

ENTERING THE SCRIPTURE

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

Today’s gospel reading depicts the baptism of Christ. It is the central narrative in the Christian season of Epiphany, and the focus of Epiphany celebrations throughout the Western Christian world.

Our children are reading and reflecting on this story today during their church school classes. They will start by making some noise in the music room, and then the younger ones will be making doves to take home for the family art gallery, which will serve as a reminder of today’s reading and of God’s revelation in their lives.

The word “Epiphany” (upper case “E”) refers to the baptism of Jesus, and his revelation as the Christ, and as the divine Son of God. Notice that in the last verse of the gospel lesson today the author describes a voice from heaven saying, “This is my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” The term “epiphany” (small case “e”) refers generally to “revelation,” or what we might describe more contemporarily as “a-ha moments.”

The occasion of Jesus’ baptism was a defining moment for him. It was the moment in which he formally accepted God’s call to ministry and after which he began his formal ministry. Most of the stories in the four gospels are about this brief two to three year period of Jesus’ life between Epiphany, his baptism, and Easter morning, his resurrection.

Let us prepare for the gospel reading by singing together the first verse of a great baptism hymn, “Child of Blessing, Child of Promise.”

MUSICAL MEDITATION “Child of Blessing, Child of Promise”¹ (v. 1)

No 325

***Child of bless-ing, child of prom-ise,
Bap-tized with the Spir-it’s sign;
With this wa-ter God has sealed you
Un-to love and grace di-vine.***

¹ Public domain.

SCRIPTURE READING

Mark 1:4-11 “The Baptism of Christ”²

⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And 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. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He 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. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And 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. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

SERMON

“Defining Moments”

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

Baptism was a defining moment in the life of Christ. In fact, the way that the gospels tell the story, Jesus’ baptism was *the* defining moment in his life. His baptism was the occasion when Jesus accepted his call to ministry and was revealed as the Messiah to his followers.

There were other defining moments in Jesus’ life that included the following: his birth, presentation in the Temple, reading of Torah in the Temple, his temptations, last supper with the disciples, his prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, and his resurrection on Easter morning.

Most of these moments marked a significant time when Jesus had to make a choice about what his life was going to be about. Each time he had to choose whether to affirm the call of God at his baptism by doing what was right, good and fitting. In every occasion described in the gospels, Jesus chose the more excellent way, and in doing so, he became for us the preeminent model of the Christian life.

III

Though many of us question our capacity to live exemplary Christian lives, or ever to achieve the level of faithfulness that Christ revealed, each of us encounters junctures on life’s journey where we must choose from a variety of options, and where we are challenged to do what is right, good, or fitting. Each opportunity with which we are presented is an opportunity to affirm our baptism.

² NRSV

Baptism for some of us may have been one of those defining moments in our lives—moments when we were challenged to decide what our lives were going to be about. For others, baptism was a ceremony that we participated in as an infant, and that we don't recall, so that confirmation or joining a church or other event more profoundly reflects the kind of life-defining events for us that baptism was for Jesus.

I wonder, what have been those defining moments for you or for me? What have been the occasions in your life or mine, when a clear decision was made that defined who we are or where we were going?

In some Christian traditions, life's defining moments are often presented as "either/or" opportunities with there being only one choice that is considered "godly." In our tradition, however, we recognize that life is often more complex than many would make it out to be, and that which choice is right, good, or fitting for us may be different from someone else in the same situation. Discerning the choice that reflects a godly way of life depends upon our individual and group calling, our context, and the particular circumstances and consequences of our lives.

With these factors in mind, consider what some of the defining moments may have been so far in your life.

Perhaps a defining moment in your life had to do with one of the following:

- Whether to be baptized or confirmed
- Whether to do what was popular with friends or do what was right
- Whether to finish high school or drop out
- Whether to burn the draft card or go to Canada
- Whether to protest or remain silent
- Whether to get a job or go to college
- Whether to stay close to home or move away
- Whether to study abroad for a year or stay with the conventional curriculum
- Whether to finish college or drop out
- Whether to do what you love or pursue a more lucrative career
- Whether to "live together" or get married
- Whether to stay "in the closet" or "come out"
- Whether to remain single by choice or to pursue a romantic relationship
- Whether to raise children or not
- Whether to adopt or try fertility treatments
- Whether to stay home with the kids or return to the workforce
- Whether to change jobs or switch careers
- Whether to smoke or to quit
- Whether to accept domestic violence as a way of life or escape to a shelter
- Whether to keep working on the marriage or get a divorce
- Whether to let the kids (or the grandkids) move back home or cut 'em loose
- Whether to get clean and sober or continue to be an addict

- Whether to continue to stay in a co-dependent relationship or give someone an ultimatum
- Whether to move into a retirement community or remain in a private home
- Whether to take the medicine or try alternative therapies
- Whether to pursue every medical intervention or let nature take its course

The list goes on. Each of us has a list. This is just a beginning.

Think about your own life for a moment. What have been those defining moments in your life?

How have your faith and values informed your decisions?

How we answer these questions isn't simply a matter of personal preference. How we respond to each of them is a faith statement. Our decisions and actions define us. They are a living testimony to our faith and values.

IV

Families, neighborhoods, churches, businesses, organizations of all types, and political entities have moments that define what their lives are about, too.

This past summer I had the opportunity to reconnect with the pastor of my youth, John Syster, who was among a handful who inspired me to respond to my call to ministry. Part of our reflections included a conversation about how my home congregation came to sponsor the resettlement of a Laotian refugee family in the late 1970s.

I was curious to hear his account of the events, because the resettlement plans were well underway when my family moved to Reinbeck, so I missed the congregations deliberations that led to the decision to help this family, but I was also curious to hear John's version of the whole process now, as an adult and a pastor myself, rather than as a new seventh grader in town and in church.

I asked John point blank how he managed to convince our stodgy congregation to sponsor a refugee family from another part of the world, who didn't look, talk, eat, or worship like we did.

Much to my surprise, John said, "It was actually pretty easy." Then he went on to explain how he broached the subject first with the Board of Deacons. They were not at all interested in the idea, but he pressed on, enumerating the reasons why it was the right thing to do.

Finally, to squelch his enthusiasm for the idea, the chair of the Board of Deacons told John that the church would sponsor a refugee family if he could find five families in the membership who would serve as the primary sponsors. (The deacons, John suspected, were pretty sure that he wouldn't be able to find five sponsoring families.)

John accepted the challenge, left the meeting to make phone calls, and returned about thirty minutes later with the needed commitments.

The true champion of the resettlement effort, John went on to explain, was a woman over the age of 65, who later became a friend of my mother's. Her name was Vic Robinson. Vic and her husband, Lyle, ran a small men's clothing store in town. Other sponsoring families included our town doctor, a couple of school teachers, a farm family, the pastor, and his spouse who was a school psychologist.

As I recall, our refugee family had a rough start in our small farming community. They suffered all the privations of persons who had lived through war, encampment, and displacement. They lacked the benefits of good nutrition, health care, and education. They missed their home, and homeland, and they were stranded hundreds of miles from their friends and extended family, who had also been relocated by the US government from Laos.

When the family arrived, they moved into low-income housing that our pastor had arranged for them. They were seen by the town doctor and dentist. Church leaders offered odd jobs for the father so that he could earn money until more settled employment could be found.

Eventually, the family's children were enrolled in public school, and the parents participated in ESL classes. The parents learned to drive a car, and to adapt in other ways to their new country. About twenty years ago, the entire family relocated to Chicago, to live nearer to friends and relatives who had settled there.

The way John remembers the story, Vic made us all look good. She provoked the good in our church and town. The way I look at it, the challenge to host a refugee family was a defining moment in the history of Union Congregational United Church of Christ in Reinbeck, Iowa. This effort was difficult work for people who only spoke English and German, who were two heads taller and very fair skinned compared to the Laotians, and who thought that rice was a dessert and not a staple food. But by the grace of God, and the true grit of Vic Robinson, Christ was revealed in and through that refugee resettlement ministry, and God was glorified.

V

Whether we are reflecting on our personal callings and journeys or those of our family, neighborhood, business, or other organization, we see—when we step back and consider the road we have been on—that we have been and we will be challenged at numerous junctures to decide what our lives will be about.

Will we choose options to walk the more Christ-like path, and will we actively work to discern what that path would look like for us?

Will we choose to provoke others or to be provoked to be our best selves? Will we participate in a community of discernment, to continue to learn about Christ's example and discern how we might best follow in his footsteps? These are the questions that are inherent in the defining moments of our lives. These are the questions that are integral to Epiphany.

What will be our answers? Will our answers reaffirm our baptism in Christ, and be a revelation of the living God for others?

Christ's example provokes us to answer with a great big "Yes." Amen.