

Expectation and Intention  
Mark 1 – 1: 11  
First United Church of Christ  
January 10, 2021  
Rev. Wendy Vander Hart

May God still speak through these words of scripture and sermon.

It is a hard time to be a preacher. The carefully laid plans to address a scripture text with forethought, discernment and contemplation often need to be thrown out the window because something has happened. Today could be such a day. This week's insurrectionist events at our nation's capital certainly warrant attention and declarations. I thank Pastor Lauren for initiating such a statement among our Northfield Area Interfaith Association colleagues condemning violence and calling for the peaceful transfer of power.

As a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ whose way is peace, but who challenged the powers that be, I call upon all of us to make a stand with our elected leaders and neighbors that decry the violence and desecration of the Capitol and demand that they hold this President and others to account for stoking the ferment that led to it. Silence, acquiescence, and apathy are not appropriate responses to what we witnessed. Righteous anger, calling to account, upholding truth-telling- these are appropriate responses that we must make.

There is more to infer and draw upon in this sermon about these events, but as a colleague of mine stated this week, I will invest my time in building on love rather than analyzing politics.

So, with a deep breath or two or three, this sermon will begin with a poll. This poll has one question with a yes or no response. I will pull it up on your screen but if you are on the phone I will tell you that the question is, "Did you make a New Year's resolution this year?" Yes or No. Let's see the results here...

Of course, this is a common question when the page turns on a new year. Studies have shown that 77% of people make resolutions. The New Year can feel like an artificial inflection point to take stock or resolve to do new things. Hopefully, we take other opportunities to set expectations and renew intentions in the way we live our lives throughout the year.

Nonetheless, as I gathered virtually with gym mates on Monday, the pre-workout stretching banter focused on the making of resolutions. When our trainer was asked about her practice she said, "I don't make resolutions. I think more about a reset, a re-prioritizing of what is important and where my focus needs to be." In response one person said she believed in keeping expectations low so that she is never disappointed! The trainer in turn replied that she prefers to craft realistic expectations from a positive outlook to focus on what is possible as a new year unfolds.

Beginnings matter. How something begins often gives shape to what is created. The Gospel of Mark begins with an expectation of good news. There are no stories of Jesus' birth in Mark. No shepherds in the field. No wise ones bearing gifts. No Mary or Joseph or angels. The story starts with these words, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." When someone says they have good news, people tend to listen. It sets an expectation – is this good news for me? What makes the news good?

In Mark we begin with John the Baptist the announcer of good news who recalls the good news bearer before him, the prophet Isaiah. But John is not the good news, only the forerunner to good news. The Baptizer is speaking in the wilderness and he has company- people from the whole Judean countryside and even all Jerusalem were flocking out there to be baptized in the water. John speaks of one coming after him who will be more powerful. More powerful than John, who is drawing people to a desolate place away from the Temple where you practice the God thing? Talk about setting expectations!

Then Jesus happens upon the scene. The one who is "more powerful" than John submits to John's baptism- allows himself to be dunked under water by this wilderness preacher.

How did Jesus get there? Was he simply curious about this buzz by the Jordan River? Did he make a new year resolution to have more God in his life? What expectation or intention did Jesus bring to the river that day? Could he have imagined that the heavens would tear open, the Spirit descend, and a voice proclaim- "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased?"

We cannot fully know what brought Jesus to the waters that day, but we can surmise that hearing a message like that sets its own expectations and intentions!

In the past when I met with parents in preparation for the baptism of their child, we would do some bible study of the baptism of Jesus. There are lots of things to notice in the story, but mostly I encouraged them to take note of the voice and its proclamation. In the moment of baptism, I invited them to listen for the voice. We cannot domesticate God so much and expect never to hear a message like that again. And even if at the time of baptism, there is no rending of the heavens nor a voice crashing in, the message remains- you are beloved. With you I am well pleased.

Knowing that belovedness, trusting God's pleasure with us should set some expectation and intention in our lives!

As we have seen this week, there will be continuity of distress between the year 2020 and 2021. The systemic nature of dysfunction will not leave us overnight. It most certainly will not be overcome unless there is expectation of something different and enacted with great intention. As I am reminded in every faith-based organizing meeting of our partner organization ISAIAH- our core values matter because they inform our expectations and intentions.

Many of the most effective and empowering actions in our nation have come from faith-based organizations. Our very democracy is patterned on the practices of congregational polity. While we as a church listen to all voices for the still speaking God, our democracy in its design borrowed that practice to form government. As we saw on Wednesday, that core value of giving voice to all is threatening to a culture built on white supremacy. As people of faith, now is the time to set expectation and intentions for how our government can serve the greater common good. No one is more beloved in the sight of God than another. We cling to that baptismal affirmation that all are beloved in the sight of God and we will continue to act and pray and live from that place.

In a few moments, when we remember the waters, when we remember the feeling, the sights, the sounds, or whatever senses light up in you when you think about that place- remember the message of baptism. God says to you and to me- you are beloved. Do not doubt this. Even when you forget, act from that place. Move into your life confident you are loved and let that love change the world. For God's sake. Amen.