

**Vigilant, Vigorous, and Vital**  
**Mark 1:1-11**  
**January 11, 2009**  
**Fifth Anniversary of My Ordination**

*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

*2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,*

*“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;*

*3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*

*‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.’ ”*

*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.”*

*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.”*

I want to begin by thanking you all for being here today. It is a very special day for me. And I am grateful for the presence of my community. Five years ago today in this very sanctuary you gave me the gift of calling me to be one of your pastors and being present for my ordination into ministry. I am so grateful for this community and for all I have learned in the last five years.

This morning I want to take the opportunity to tell you about something on my heart that I have been thinking about the last few months. Something that I have learned from you and with you.

Advent began with a cry from the prophet in Isaiah 64...O that you would tear open the heavens and come down! We heard the prophet crying out for the people, crying out for us...come down O God and be among us...right our wrongs...cleanse our souls... we long to know that you are really with us. We long to trust to you again for *we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. We are all your people.* We long to remember who we are in covenant with you, O God. We long for reconciliation!

Christmas came...we celebrated the birth of Emmanuel, God with us...the Spirit of God come down in the Christ Child, Jesus, whose presence reminds us who we are created to be...reminds us that we are created in God’s image and therefore we too are “God with us.” Whose presence reminds us that to find our God-given selves we must look within and find God.

Now here we are in Epiphany...the season of manifestation and revelation... we hear in our story today that God did indeed tear open the heavens! And we hear a prophet calling to us again...Metanoia! if we were to hear it in New Testament Greek...Repent! That is, change your mind completely...turn back to truth...come and find a new direction, a new purpose in life through relationship to God! Pretty timely message for a new year...

The prophet is John, the Baptizer, is not only preaching, but also offering a sign of new beginning in relationship to God, baptism, a Jewish purification rite, an ancient cleansing ritual with water that signifies the acceptance deep within of God's forgiving and revitalizing love.

And who should come to receive this ancient rite but the very one the prophet is foretelling! *"The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me;... I baptize you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."* ....Jesus of Nazareth. In the midst of the waters of baptism God, at least in the eyes and soul of Jesus, tears open the heavens and comes down and Jesus sees *the Spirit descending like a dove on him...* God reveals and makes manifest to Jesus his true identity in the moment of baptism, *"You are my Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

Baptism did not begin with Jesus and Christianity. Throughout the Hebrew scriptures we find reference to the cleansing use of water in priestly rites before worship and in rites of purification for anyone visiting to the temple to cleanse the worshiper both physically and morally. In fact, I suspect that from the beginning of time people have used water not only for the practical purposes of cleaning the body but also for the sacred, symbolic properties of water.

Let's think about water for just a moment...we know many things about water scientifically that the ancients could only intuited.

Water is the most common substance on earth...it is ever present in our lives...it is present in three forms, liquid, gas and solid...there are 332, 500,000 cubic miles of water on earth, something like one million gallons per mile...Water is all around us at all times... you could almost say it has a vigilant presence it is so necessary to life on earth.

It has a vigorous presence as well...it may change form, but it is never entirely used up...it regenerates. It evaporates into the air only to become clouds which become full and empty themselves as rain on the earth again. Every glass of water we drink contains molecules of water that have been used countless times.

And water is regenerative for it is vital to life. All living things consist mostly of water. A tomato is 95% water, a potato, 80%. Though it may be hard to see, an elephant is 70% water. And we human beings are 65%, our brains are 70%, our lungs, 90%, our blood, 83%. If we lose more the 20% of our water content, we are in danger of dying.

Water may not be always visible, but it has a vigilant and vigorous presence which is vital to all of life.

What better image is there than water for the love of God that dwells within us?

What better image is there than water for God's love as the container, the vessel, within which we dwell as God's beloved co-creators of life?

This most basic life-giving element, water, used in a simple ritual, makes reveals and makes tangible for us, as it did for Jesus, who we are created to be. We are God's beloveds created in the image of God to be in loving relationship with God. Just as Jesus came to experience the waters of God's love in the community of faith following John, we are invited into community through God's love that flows like water to be in loving relationship with one another as well as with ourselves.

We need no longer cry out with the prophet...Come down, O God! For we have heard the story of Christmas, we are in the midst of Epiphany, the time of manifestation and revelation! God is here within and without like the vigilant, vigorous and vital presence of water. The prophet, John, promised that Jesus would baptize us with the Spirit and that very Spirit flows like an ever-present stream, flows and is God's connecting presence surrounding and permeating us with God's love.

All we need do is to turn when we hear the voice of God in the prophet's call and give ourselves over to a change of heart, a new direction, a new experience of the truth of who we are. *"You are my Beloved, says God," with you I am well pleased."*

Are you listening? Will you answer the call?