

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
8 January 2006
Mighty Waters
Text: Mark 1:4-11

I've been asking the standard January question: Did you make any new years' resolutions? This year more than ever I hear in response "No, did you?" And I realize I haven't, and I'm trying to figure out why. It's not that there isn't room for improvement: to be fitter, wiser, more prayerful, more productive, for example. To repair a broken relationship. Reconnect with a friend with whom I've fallen out of touch. Organize my photos. Finish my Christmas cards before Ground Hog Day. Part of me loves the concept of making resolutions; part of me balks at the struggle of keeping them. The 18th century writer and pundit Samuel Johnson never stopped making resolutions and recording them in his journal. Periodically he assessed how well he was doing, and for better or for worse, recorded those too. Here's a typical entry: *I have corrected no external habits, nor have I kept any of the resolutions made in the beginning of the year, yet I hope still to be reformed, and not to lose my whole life in idle purposes.* There's something to be said for eternal optimism, for perseverance, and for starting anew.

The morning gospel reading begins with the spiritual equivalent of a new year's resolution, but doesn't stop there. John the Baptizer comes, preaching a powerful message about the need for change. But John announces something more: the arrival of One who can actually change us; the One who gives us power to accomplish what we resolve. This is the One who comes up from out of water blessed by heaven and dripping with divine purpose. This is the One who calls us to a new beginning in the mighty waters of baptism. Listen for God's Word to the Church in the reading from the gospel according to Mark, in the first chapter, at the fourth verse (found on p. 34 of the pew/chapel Bibles). [Mark 1:4-11]

Summaries of the year just past have included photographs of the devastation caused by tsunami and hurricane, startling reminders of nature's force unleashed in wind and water. What once was Banda Aceh, what once was the ninth ward of New Orleans were undone in the unbridled power of storm. Death was in that undoing. Though we like to think we have achieved a certain mastery over nature, our ancient ancestors may have had more understanding in realizing that its power cannot be entirely managed or domesticated. To them, the surging waters of the sea represented chaos: formless, enveloped in darkness, disordered and destructive.

Yet out of this chaos, God created: order, light, the heavens and the earth. I'm intrigued by the question posed by variations in the rendering of the Hebrew in the opening sentences of Genesis. While the New Revised Standard version sticks with the familiar "In the beginning when God created...." a growing number of biblical scholars prefer to translate it "When God began to create..." There's no ambiguity in affirming that it is God who initiated creation, but only in God's chosen methodologies and time line. There need be no tension between faith and science, unless one insists on merging them, which violates the spirit of both. Let the schools teach scientific theories and principles in science class; faith matters belong in the home and the church.

The essential goodness of creation does not eliminate its chaotic origins however. Growing vegetation is watered by rain. Humans are nourished in the waters of the womb before they see the light of day. Water cleanses; water nourishes; water is essential to sustain life on planet earth. But we forget its potential for destruction at our peril. In water's elemental composition lie the seeds for both life and death.

I think it's important that we be reminded of this when it comes to baptism. Because we most often participate in the baptism of infants, we emphasize the unconditional divine love

which is our birthright. We touch the vulnerable head of a baby with a splash of water that has been warmed so as not to shock the infant into screams of outrage. We hold them protectively close, and surround them with the smiling congregation to say "Welcome to the world, little one. You're here as family. You are not alone."

And that is all true. But it's not the whole story. The distinctive meaning of Jesus' baptism adds another dimension to our own. Washing with water as a symbolic cleansing rite was not initiated by John. Many religions include some kind of "baptism" and in John's day, Jewish leaders would baptize converts to the faith as a sign of the person's new belief. But John understood that something else, something important was happening here. That's why he described his baptism by water as contingent: *the one who is more powerful than I is coming.....he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*

With characteristic brevity, the gospel writer moves directly to the moment of Jesus baptism, omitting the discussion between John and Jesus found in the other gospels about whether it is appropriate for John to baptize Jesus who needed no repentance. But Mark is not concerned with such debates, but hinges everything on the identity of Jesus revealed in the voice from heaven authorizing him, and the visible representation of the Holy Spirit descending upon him. And filled with this Spirit, Jesus' ministry is launched, a wild ride into the wilderness and into the city, encounters with beggars and prostitutes, with rich men and religious leaders and rulers of nations; powerful healing and tears of anguish, truth-telling and betrayal, suffering and vindication. In some ways it's ironic that the gospel explicitly declares Jesus' identity to be the beloved Son of God, because it raises as many questions as it answers. Throughout Jesus' life, you sense the struggle of disciples and religious leaders alike to understand what his words and actions mean.

It's our struggle as well. And why we need to come to these mighty waters and re-commit ourselves to the Beloved One,

God's Son. We need the power. We need a font which will water our spiritual lives so that they are not merely a never-ending series of resolutions to do better and be better. For as we struggle to understand this One called "God's Son, the Beloved," we are offered the very same Spirit which descended upon him. And that Spirit creates from nothing, animates the lifeless, and resurrects the dead. This baptism is not so much our entry into a particular religion, as it is our commencement to a new way of life.

And what a life! The film release of C.S. Lewis' "Chronicles of Narnia" prompted me to look again at these thrilling tales, written for children, which can be read as allegories of the Christian life. They are a marvelous antidote to portrayals of Christian life as boring or worse, as confined, self-righteous rule-keeping under the watchful eye of the Divine Wet Blanket. Here is how the children learn of Aslan, the great Lion who is the Christ metaphor.

"Is---is he a man?" asked Lucy.

"Aslan a man!" said Mr. Beaver sternly. "Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-Beyond-the Sea. Don't you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion—THE lion, the great Lion."

"Oooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver. "If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" asked Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

The way of life blazed by the beloved son of God is not safe. It wasn't for him, and it won't be for us. But it will be a life!—a real life, of joyful purpose, of connection and hope. Don't take my word for it. Jesus himself promised his disciples that they would do greater things than they had witnessed. Jesus'

baptism inaugurated a new day by the symbolic descent of God's Spirit into the world.

As Fairmount approaches our 90th birthday, your leadership team has been considering who we are and how we define our mission in this community. I know these are important discussions that will help shape our future. But we already know something about both those questions. Our baptism declares not only that we are children of God, and members of the household of faith, but that we are disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our mission is to follow. To serve as he served; love as he loved. Can you imagine what could happen if we did?!

Poised on the threshold of a new year provides opportunity to assess where we are, as individuals and as a church. We return to our roots in these waters of baptism. We come to be renewed, to have our faith which may have dimmed or dried out, restored and refreshed. We come for mid-course correction, to find the path again, and receive divine power for walking it.

Come to these mighty waters, friends, to become immersed in the fullness of life. And then take care what you resolve. For God is faithful and is just likely to get you to do it. [BEGIN BAPTISM RENEWAL AT FONT]