

Children’s Moment

Good morning, girls and boys. Happy New Year! Esperanza and I pray for you and your family. We are beginning 2021 with a lot of challenges, but we start each year with hope.

The reason we have hope is Jesus. He helps us in all sorts of situations. Here are two examples.

You know there are some bad things going on. We’re all struggling with the pandemic flu called COVID-19. Because of that, we have to wear masks, stay home instead of going to school. We can’t meet together at church. We have to be careful when we’re around other people, particularly our grandparents, so they don’t get sick. That’s one problem.

Another problem you may or may not know about is what happened in Washington, D.C. on Wednesday. Washington, D.C. is where our nation’s capital is. Well, on Wednesday, there was a riot. People broke into the capital. Some people were hurt and a few people died. There are a lot of angry words being said by a lot of people right now.

What can you do when you’re faced with a disease or angry people? I turn to God and ask Jesus for help. The reason I do that is because I know that people are hurting and afraid. People are afraid they’ll get sick. And people are hurt by the selfishness of our leaders. They’re afraid they won’t get their way. They don’t know what to do, so they’re mean to each other.

When I’m afraid, I remember one thing: Jesus makes our lives better when we are together. We can be better than we are. We don’t have to be afraid. Jesus shows us another way to be, a better way to live.

Jesus shows us that love is a better way. He asks us to love God, love other people, care for others in the same way we care for ourselves and even love our enemies. When we do that, people stop fighting. We help our friends, family and neighbors who are sick. We stop arguing about who’s in control and work together to make the world a better place.

We aren’t very good at this. We need your help to show us how.

Will you pray with me?

Message: "What's the Holy Spirit?"

This has been a once-in-a-lifetime week. At least I hope it is, as I'm sure you do. The events in Washington, D.C. and other state capitols show us what division, fear and selfish ambition can lead to.

We, as a people and a nation, were far from our best. My thoughts and prayers go out to those who lost their lives, those who suffered injury and all of us, who have yet one more log of pain to add to the already roaring fire of human suffering we're enduring.

Let's face it: we are in the middle of the perfect storm. The waves of insurrection, prejudice and pandemic are threatening to overturn us, spilling us into an ocean of chaos, injustice and fear. Sadly, these tides are not rogue waves. They are waves of our own making.

This week, we came face-to-face with our own image in the mirror. I don't know about you, but I flinched. What I saw was horrifying. Evil made it's presence known, showing us a new face on what is really an old thing: human nature. Paul's words are poignant in this moment, "*all have sinned and come short of earning God's praise*" (Romans 3:23, CJB). Enough is enough. We can be better, but we need God and each other to do so.

To be honest, I had a different kind of sermon planned for today. I was going to spend time with Luke's narrative in the book of Acts, showing the relationship between Paul and Apollos as an illustration of the difference between a godly person and a good person. But Wednesday changed that.

How could I not address the elephant in the room, the threats to our democracy, community and our very lives? I wouldn't be much of a pastor if I ignored these needs as they affect our community, households and personal lives.

Like many of you, I was glued to my electronic devices Wednesday and Thursday, watching what happened as it unfolded, looking for clues and understanding. What's going on? How will our leaders respond? What's next? What does it mean?

What do you do when you’re faced with a life-changing event?

We all may have different answers. Here’s what I found myself doing. I found myself praying. And I was drawn to Scripture, specifically Mark’s narrative. I meditated, practicing mindfulness to help me center myself and realize that worry, anxiety and anger could flow through me without harming who I am. I don’t tell you this to boast or make myself look better than I am or to seek approval. In fact, I was surprised to find myself able to cope in this way. That’s a far cry from where I was a couple of months ago when I was struggling with moderate depression. When you get a prompting to turn to God, I encourage you to do so. Jesus makes our lives better when we’re together.

These practices helped me to gain a new appreciation for Jesus’ baptism and power it has in our lives today. The hope we need in this moment, the new year and the future finds a beginning in baptism. Baptism is key to real life. Now I know that’s a radical shift. Let me explain how I arrive at this theological understanding without abusing the text.

The first step on the path is found in nature of John the Baptist, his message and mission. Mark tells us John didn’t visit the cities often. He went from place to place in the wilderness, traveling from small town to village. John didn’t fit the image of a prophet. His message was bold and direct: the way to change your heart and life is ask God to forgive your sins. Baptism in water was the rite to publicly show this commitment to a better life.

John’s message was hugely popular! He was a celebrity. Thousands of people from all walks of life came to John to be baptized.

People were suffering. It was a harsh time. Roman troops occupied the country and had the power to put people to death at will. People who couldn’t repay their debts or pay taxes were either put in jail or forced to sell their family members or themselves into slavery. Poverty and hunger were common and there was no cure for any of the diseases. If you got sick, you had to hope your body was strong enough to survive. Finally, church and political leaders were ambitious but focused on their own interests, selling favors to those who were wealthy. True repentance and forgiveness was seldom found or offered.

Sound familiar? The people of Jesus' day were suffering like we are. So, when they heard John's message about a way to a better life, everyone jumped. After all, it had been 400 years since a prophet spoke for God. When life is tedious and harsh, humans seek escape. Some look to heaven for help. When the people heard John was at the river, baptizing people to offer a way to a better life, the only thought most folks had was "let's go."

Now things were going along as expected with John was baptizing people, until the day Jesus came. John baptized him. When Jesus rose up out of the water, a voice from heaven spoke saying, "*You are my Son, whom I love; I am well pleased with you*" (Mark 1:11, CJB).

Mark's narrative is very direct. He doesn't add embellishment. Yet in every passage you read, there's an anticipation and excitement coming through. Jesus was baptized, just like any other person. But Jesus wasn't like any other person. God reveals Jesus as God's Son, loved by God. And, even more, what Jesus is doing pleases God!

This is the turning point, the epiphany – a special revelation. Salvation hinges on the grace of God in this moment. God's work begins when things seem bleakest, when we feel most alone, without hope, convicted of our sin and wrongdoing. When we are ready for our lives to change and become better, we find God is there, waiting to bless us and give us a gift - the Holy Spirit, who comes to live inside us.

That's where we are today. Jesus comes to us, just as he did to the disciples when they were in a boat in a storm on the sea. Jesus walked on water to meet them. They were terrified, thinking he was a ghost, coming to harm them. Jesus' words to them speak to us today, "*Be encouraged! It's me. Don't be afraid*" (Mark 6:50, CEB). I don't know about you, but that gives me hope. We don't have to be afraid. There is another way to live. All we have to do is accept Jesus.

Jesus plays the major role in this good news. Without him, there's no baptism, no voice from heaven, no Spirit descending. Jesus completes the work of God. He fulfills the promise. God responds to our act of contrition with grace: grace that not only saves (justifying grace), but grace which guides and perfects us in love (sanctifying grace).

Jesus’ baptism opens the doorway to heaven so anyone can enter.

All can receive God’s pardon and the gift of God’s Spirit, healing and guiding us so our life is made better, one step at a time. We find ourselves more confident and less anxious, knowing God keeps promises. We’re filled with joy, even when we struggle, because we know God is always with us. We want to love and care for other people because we’re compelled to share the love and care we receive from God. We’re filled with faith, hope and the greatest gift ... love.

Jesus makes our lives better when we’re together. He will never leave us alone, no matter where we find ourselves, what our situation is or how confused we may become. Turn to him, ask for forgiveness and receive the Holy Spirit in his name. Don’t hold back, change your life.

Now, I can hear what some of you are thinking: this sounds naïve, like real pie-in-the-sky stuff. After all, I’ve prayed ... God didn’t answer and bad things happened. Or, I’ve never been baptized, are you telling me I’m not saved? Or, this is just positive thinking. You wouldn’t really want to know me if you knew about me and God doesn’t care, either. Or, the world is unjust and God can’t, or won’t, change it.

I want to tell you God knows your fears, hurt feelings and flaws.

God made you and loves you in spite of the distrust you may have.

It’s hard to admit, but we are the ones who embrace evil.

Our suffering finds it’s root in the selfish, unjust things humans do to each other. God comes to us and is with us when things are at their worst. God’s hand is always stretched out, ready to help us. We’re the ones who ignore God, preferring to go our own way.

That’s why the message of John the Baptist was so powerful:

turn to God ask for forgiveness and your life will change. There’s only one problem: this message is limited to the good we can do on our own. We can’t save ourselves. We’re still separated from God.

Jesus takes the message to the next level. Jesus was baptized not because he needed forgiveness for sin, but because he wanted to enter into our lives. Jesus was baptized with water to show that he’s like us, he knows our human trials. Jesus was baptized with the Spirit to show us we can be like him, filled with the divine presence of God.

Jesus gives us a new identity through baptism. Jesus offers us a fresh start, a new, spiritual life. It's a changed life. To enjoy that life, we have to leave old patterns, bad attitudes and behaviors behind. It may take time, but don't give up. Jesus won't give up on you.

Jesus invites us to become part of a community - a family, rooted in faith, hope and love. That's the kind of community that makes our lives, households, community and nation better.

That's why Paul asked the people in Ephesus, "*Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? Did you take God into your mind only, or did you also embrace him with your heart? Did he get inside you?*" (Acts 19:2, MSG). He wanted to be sure they were on the best path. I'll bet Paul wasn't surprised to hear their response, "*What's the Holy Spirit?*" (v3). People ask the same thing today.

Paul asked because he suspected the truth: the people had only gone part of the way. They had received John's baptism, but they missed the most important step: Jesus' baptism, the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

This is a critical point, as Paul explains, "*John preached a baptism of radical life-change so that people would be ready to receive the One coming after him, who turned out to be Jesus. If you've been baptized in John's baptism, you're ready now for the real thing, for Jesus*" (v4). The group was baptized and immediately began to show the presence of the Holy Spirit as they spoke in other tongues and showed other signs.

This is a sign of true belief. I have good news: it's free. It starts with a life change that leads to asking for forgiveness. Confessing your belief to others and accepting Jesus as your Savior completes the act. Once you do, the Holy Spirit comes to live inside you. Your life will get better immediately, even if your situation doesn't change. You will be free from whatever was holding you back from a better life.

God is with us in chaotic times, times when we feel alone, times when we're tempted to do the wrong thing. We know this because God's Spirit sends Jesus into the wilderness for 40 days to be tempted and prepared for his life to come. Jesus shows us that fame, fortune and power aren't the way to a better life. Staying true to God is the way to real life - here and now, and for all of eternity.

So, when you watch news of insurrection and political division or when you see yet another unjust act done to those we marginalize and oppress or when you lose a loved one or catch the virus or when you battle with mental health issues, remember Jesus’ words: *“Be encouraged. It’s me. Don’t be afraid.”*

And when you’re ready to really, truly change your life, confess your sins, ask for forgiveness and accept the Holy Spirit. Your life, and the lives of those around you, will be made better when you do.

If you’re ready to do so now, I invite you to pray with me:

“O God, I’m ready to change my life. I believe in you and your love. Forgive me for all the ways I have broken our relationship, for the wrongs I have done to others. I want to be filled with your love and grace. Come, Lord Jesus, into my life so that I may be better. In Jesus’ name I pray, amen.”

If you earnestly prayed this prayer, welcome to the family!

Jesus, our brother, will care for you and guide you through the Holy Spirit who now lives inside you. I encourage you to pray to God each day, to begin reading the Bible – perhaps you might start with the book of Mark. Join a small group so you can connect with other people who believe and live changed lives. Please contact me (CoronaUMC@gmail.com) to let me know of your decision and so I can share in your good news. God is good. Praise God.

Acts 19:1-7 (CEB)

¹ While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul took a route through the interior and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. ² He asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you came to believe?”

They replied, “We’ve not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”

³ Then he said, “What baptism did you receive, then?”

They answered, “John’s baptism.”

⁴ Paul explained, “John baptized with a baptism by which people showed they were changing their hearts and lives. It was a baptism that told people about the one who was coming after him. This is the one in whom they were to believe. This one is Jesus.” ⁵ After they listened to Paul, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶ When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in other languages and prophesying. ⁷ Altogether, there were about twelve people.

Mark 1:4-11 (CEB)

⁴ John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. ⁵ Everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins. ⁶ John wore clothes made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey.

⁷ He announced, “One stronger than I am is coming after me. I’m not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

⁹ About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. ¹⁰ While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. ¹¹ And there was a voice from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness.”