

# Waiting for a Breakthrough

**Scripture Readings: Mark 1:4-11, Acts 19:1-7**

Well this has been a bit of a week. Everybody doing okay out there? Are your eyes red from staring at the news, refreshing your feed, contemplating the tangible and existential horror of watching an assault on democracy in real time whilst contemplating the start of a second year of pandemic life? It is natural to feel exhausted by these things. And I pray you are all being gentle with yourselves. I would be confused if you weren't feeling the emotional impact even if you remain among the lucky ones who have not yet gotten sick, who have not yet lost someone they love to COVID. This has been such a long journey. So... Are you tired? Are you thirsty? Longing for something, anything, that can quench the parched throats of those who have been shouting and praying over and over again "How long O Lord? How Long?" Are you feeling fractured, or slowed to a crawl, anxious, angry, afraid? Yeah, me too.

So I suppose it is good that we are here, even when here is necessarily conveyed through a screen. Here is the right place to be when everything feels so completely wrong, and so very out of control. It is exactly the right time for us to remember our Baptism. So come. Come to the water, and let us remember together.

In the story of John the Baptizer, who was already baptizing away down at the river Jordan, when he saw his cousin approaching, I wonder what he knew, if he had any true inkling how much the world was about to change. Surely he sensed the kindred power of divine direction. We know he knew and named that he was unworthy to so much as help Jesus with his shoes. He knew he could baptize with water and another would come who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. But I wonder if he knew what that meant. The absolutely overwhelming power of his mother's cousin's boy, grown now and stepping into his power. I wonder if Elizabeth and Mary ever told their boys about their first earthly meeting, each boy leaping in his mother's womb. Still, history aside, do you think John really knew what baptism could mean?

I'm not sure I know what Baptism means either. You get asked about your theology of Baptism a bunch of times on the road to becoming an ordained clergy person, and it's the question I most often fumble. Not because I don't know the "right" answer, but more because it seems like such a desperately deep and personal and subjective thing. Here is the best I've got. You've got your life, or my life, anybody's life. And it's here, this horizontal plane that moves chronologically, birth to death and hopefully enough years in between. And then you've got the more vertical aspects of life, the spiritual, the timeless, the eternal, throughout which God is always reaching down a hand towards us. God is always there. God's hand is always reaching for you.

And the sacraments are the moments when we reach back up. The moments when we accept God in ways that are public and live our faith out loud. The moments we say as a community yes, Lord, we hear you. We are listening. We will go. Show us the way.

In baptism, we are born again, made new in our life with Christ. Now there's a phrase I find just excruciatingly uncomfortable. "Born again". Connotes all kinds of theologies and practices I disagree with. Yet that's what it comes down to. A commitment that we renew and return to over and over again, in the practice of Baptism, in the renewal of faith, in our return to the bread and the cup and the table. We are allowing, admitting, asking for our selves to be made new again. And like an ever-patient teacher, God meets us there, the living waters are made fresh, the table is replenished. It is about sanctifying the moment when we break from ourselves, saying goodbye to who we were and claiming fully whose we are. It is the cataclysmic reality of following Jesus Christ.

In the ancient Greek of the New Testament, there is a word used at that wild, crucial moment when the skies open and the dove flies past and the voice of God is heard. That moment of the sky breaking open is described by the Greek word *skizo*. Torn apart. This verb only shows up one other time, in the Gospel of Mark when Christ breathes his last, and the temple curtain is *skizo*. It doesn't just rip. The skies don't just open. They are both being torn apart.

And, my friends, some things have to be torn apart. Sometimes the tearing apart is what lets us finally see clearly. This past week seems to have surprised many, many people. Now shocked, that I understand. But surprised? The things we took for granted – that a peaceful transition of power could be expected in this country, the value of dignity, the respect for our processes of free and fair election – have been in jeopardy for some time. Scholars and activists aplenty had warned of the likelihood of just such an event. Yet somehow so many among us were surprised. So many are claiming that this is not who we are as a nation, having never listened to our Indigenous siblings, to people of color, to migrant workers, to the poor. If we had, we would know this no surprise – this is a natural byproduct of exactly who we are. How dare we be surprised that a country built on the foundation of colonization and slavery has come to this

So many have heard “Black Lives Matter” and presumed it a slogan, an inconvenience, a nuisance. So many did not and do not see it for what it is: a pained, desperate and begging plea ... Please, let the life of a Black person matter to you as much as a White one. That's it. If you are unsure how the events of Wednesday are connected to white supremacy, I would implore you to join us for our second round of classes from our anti-racism task force starting in Lent.

But to not declare that of course Black lives matter so much, to God, and to us, to not denounce white supremacy in every ugly form it takes, would be a dishonor to this pulpit and the Christ who died for us all.

I wonder if those who were surprised by Wednesday's attempted coup have considered how deeply lucky they are. How very secure a life that must be, to go untouched by the realities our siblings of color face every day. How very alarming to realize the depths of injustice for the first time. I hope those who find themselves startled awake this week also find themselves at the water this morning. There is room at the water's edge for everyone.

But now you have seen, we have surely all seen, that the logical direction of white supremacy, of hatred, of the deeply held beliefs in exceptionalism, in the religion of nationalism, in the worship of cruelty, in the idolatry of fools, is and was always going to be death. Jesus is the Living water. Jesus is the bread of Life. All of this, whether you are just seeing it now or have known it for some time or have lived it in your bones and in your ancestors for generation after generation, this is anathema to the love of God as expressed to us in Jesus Christ.

Theologian James Cone put it perfectly when he wrote "Unlike the God of Greek philosophy who is removed from history, the God of the Bible is involved in history, and [God's] revelation is inseparable from the social and political affairs of Israel....Yahweh is known and worshipped as the Lord who brought Israel out of Egypt and raised Jesus from the dead. [Yahweh] is the political God, the Protector of the poor and the Establisher of the right for those who are oppressed."

Ours is the God of the oppressed, and the hurt. We follow a servant leader. Jesus did not grandstand, didn't glory in attention, didn't sow seeds of hatred. Jesus visited the sick and looked after the lost and washed the feet of his disciples.

At around 1 in the morning on Thursday, U.S. representative Andy Kim, the son of Korean immigrant parents, the first Asian American to represent New Jersey in Congress, was seen on his hands and knees, picking up the leftover debris from the attack of domestic terrorists on our capitol

building. He wasn't doing it for an audience – it only made news reports because a colleague happened to spot him, silently picking up water bottles and broken glass, pizza boxes and a torn American flag. It had been an incredibly long and harrowing day, but Representative Kim felt compelled to help. “When you see something you love that’s broken you want to fix it,” he said. “I love the Capitol. I’m honored to be there. This building is extraordinary and the rotunda in particular is just awe-inspiring. How many countless generations have been inspired in that room? It really broke my heart and I just felt compelled to do something. ... What else could I do?”

When you see something you love that’s broken, you want to fix it.

What else can we do? But begin to pick up the broken pieces, to pray our hearts out, to remind ourselves of who we really belong to, and then turn to one another and the world with the kind of love and passion for justice that overwhelms even the ferocity and pain and hatred of those who attacked our nation.

So I am praying – without ceasing - for a break through. We surely need it. May God break in to this moment. May God tear whatever needs to be torn in our lives to put a stop to this. May God break our hearts for what surely breaks the heart of God. We can begin today. We can go back to our own beginnings of our journey with our loving and gracious and world-upending Christ.

So it is here, at the water, that we will begin, again. Where else would we start? Come. Come to be refreshed. Come and be reminded. If you come to the water, come expecting to be transformed. I cannot promise that you will stop feeling tired or anxious or parched or scared or angry. I cannot promise that the madness of this season is going to stop.

But I can promise you that here, at the water, you will be reminded today and again and again and again that you are a beloved child of God. Blessed and called to act for justice, to love with radical kindness, to adore mercy, to champion grace, called to all this and so much more by the Holy one whose name is Love. May God break into your life, and mine, and all of our lives this day and forever more.