**1/10/21 Worship Service**

Welcome:

Good morning. I want to welcome you to the First Congregational Church of Randolph. No matter who you are and where you are on life’s journey, we welcome you here. And we look forward to seeing you in the sanctuary here when COVID is under better control.

Now let us center ourselves for worship. Please bow your heads and close your eyes and pray.

Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you for this new year, this new day, and renewed hope. We ask that you help us through our daily trials and help all who are affected physically, emotionally, and financially by COVID. And we ask you to open our hearts so that we can be of service to others. In Jesus’ name we pray, amen. Take care.

Hymn: I Sing the Mighty Power of God

I sing the mighty pow’r of God, that made the mountains rise,

That spread the flowing seas abroad, and built the lofty skies.

I sing the wisdom that ordained the sun to rule the day;

The moon shines full at His command, and all the stars obey.

I sing the goodness of the Lord, that filled the earth with food,

He formed the creatures through His Word, and then pronounced them good.

Lord, how Thy wonders are displayed, where’er I turn my eye,

If I survey the ground I tread, or gaze upon the sky.

There’s not a plant or flow’r below, but makes Thy glories known,

And clouds arise, and tempests blow, by order from Thy throne;

While all that borrows life from Thee is ever in Thy care;

And everywhere that man can be, Thou, God, art present there.

Scripture

Good morning, everyone. Our first Scripture reading this morning is from Genesis. It’s Chapter 1, verses 1 through 5.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void and darkness covered the face of the earth, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day.

Our second reading this morning is Psalm 29, a psalm of David.

Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings,

 ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name;

 worship the Lord in holy array.

The voice of the Lord is upon the waters;

 the God of glory thunders,

 the Lord, upon many waters.

The voice of the Lord is powerful,

 the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.

The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars,

 the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon.

He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf,

 and Sir′ion like a young wild ox.

The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire.

The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness,

 the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

The voice of the Lord makes the oaks to whirl,[b]

 and strips the forests bare;

 and in his temple all cry, “Glory!”

The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;

 the Lord sits enthroned as king for ever.

May the Lord give strength to his people!

 May the Lord bless his people with peace!

Our third reading this morning is from the book of Mark. It’s chapter 1, verses 4 through 11.

John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, “After me comes the one who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Anthem: At The River (Shall We Gather at the River)

Shall we gather at the river,

Where bright angel feet have trod,

With its crystal tide forever

Flowing by the throne of God?

Shall we gather at the river,

Where bright angel feet have trod,

With its crystal tide forever

Flowing by the throne of God?

Yes, we'll gather at the river,

The beautiful river,

Gather with the saints at the river

That flows by the throne of God.

Ere we reach the shining river,

Lay we every burden down,
Grace our spirits will deliver,

And provide a robe,

And provide a robe,

And provide a robe and crown.

Soon we'll reach the shining river,

Soon our pilgrimage will cease;

Soon our happy hearts will quiver

With the melody of peace

Yes, we'll gather at the river,

The beautiful river,

Gather with the saints at the river

That flows by the throne of God.

That flows by the throne of God,

Of God.

Sermon: “The Baptism of Jesus: John and Jesus, You and Me”

Last week, Reverend Dave Henkelmann shared with us the story of the Magi, proclaiming the significance of the baby Jesus as the nascent king of the Jews, and its meaning for us in present times.

Today, according to the liturgical calendar, we jump forward to Jesus' baptism according to John the Baptist. I'm here in the Sanctuary of our church next to the baptismal font that has been used to administer the sacrament of baptism hundreds of times since this meetinghouse was consecrated in 1937. It was the font used by Rev. Dr. Arthur Bowler to baptize me in 1957, but we’ll come back to that later.

January is a time of new beginnings as shown by the New Years' Resolutions that many of us make at this time of the year, especially those aimed at improving our physical and spiritual health.

So in this season of new beginnings, it’s appropriate that we look at the event that marked the beginning of a new life and ministry of Jesus as the Son of God, as well as that of John the Baptist, and see how we got here from there. Along the way we can try to answer the following questions:

-How was this event seen and followed by the early Christians?

-How were the rituals and liturgy that they developed influenced by the cultural practices of the Jewish and Hellenistic societies that early Christianity flourished in?

-And finally, how have those traditions continued to evolve into the baptismal practices of our church today as one of the two rites of passage for all believers in our church that are derived directly from the time of Christ.

OK, so we know about Jesus from the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke that tell the story of Jesus' birth and, in a more limited way, they tell about his youth, but what do we know about the other part of this baptismal duo, John?

According to the Gospel of Luke, John was the son of the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, both descendants of the High Priest of the Temple, Moses' brother Aaron. Like Jesus, John is what today we would call a “miracle baby” bestowed by God to this couple who were well on in years after a lifetime struggle with the pain of infertility. John and Jesus were cousins through their mothers. Both come into their own as preachers in their early thirties. Beyond that, we know very little. John appears in all four Gospels, as a figure emerging from the wilderness of Judea invoking the words of the prophet Isaiah saying: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” He called for followers to repent and be ritually cleansed through baptism in preparation for the coming of the Kingdom of God. Some scholars have suggested that with his priestly origins John may have spent time with one of the ascetic Essene communities that were active in the wilderness region around the Dead Sea, perhaps after the death of his parents. While this is possible, his public preaching was contrary to the more monastic lifestyle of these Judean religious communities. John appears to be one of many holy persons in the region, and he soon would be joined by one other: Jesus of Nazareth.

As we see from Mark's Gospel, Jesus is baptized by John in the River Jordan. There were many others from the area around Jerusalem and throughout Judea who came to be baptized as well. This meant that Jesus would have had to have traveled some forty to sixty miles from Nazareth, and perhaps came initially to the River Jordan not only to be baptized, but to be one of John’s disciples. The practice of baptism was not unique to John, but arose from the cleansing rituals that were part of Jewish tradition, as found in the book of Leviticus in the Old Testament. It was also a practice of the Essene sects in Judaism, who practiced similar baptisms to initiate converts who repented of their sins as a form of spiritual cleansing and rebirth.

As in the other Gospels, Mark relates that at the time of Jesus' baptism, his divinity is revealed by the opening of the heavens, the descent of the hand of God or the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove which alights on Jesus, and the proclamation from the heavens, “This is my Beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased”.

This morning's first scriptural passage from the beginning of Genesis about the creation of the world equates light with goodness, saying: “The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the waters. And God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.”

This verse parallels the opening of the Gospel of John that precedes the confirmation of Jesus as the Son of God with this statement: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”, and later goes on to say, “In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness was not overcome by it.”

Later in the Gospel, Jesus states, “I am the light of the world”. Often in the Bible, when some action of God takes place, the Heavens open, and the light of God illuminates the scene. This is what happens when the angels appear to the shepherds in the fields of Judea at the time of Jesus' birth, scaring the heck out of them, as it probably would have us. But every time that the light of God shines upon us, it is a good thing.

So from that we learn that Light equals God and that God equals Good, and with the baptism of Jesus and the revelation of his divinity, we add a further link in that sequence: Jesus=Light=God=Good. In our Advent celebration, we use the lighting of the candles to light up the darkness of the world in anticipation of the arrival of the “Light of the World”, Jesus.

The three Synoptic Gospels describe God and his affirmation of Jesus’ divinity as the Son of God, and it is hard to tell whether this is a “public address”, or something experienced by Jesus as a sort of “still small voice”, or some sort of all-pervasive spirit that infused all who witnessed the baptism of Jesus.

The baptism of Jesus marked the beginning of his public ministry, gathering his own disciples, including those of John the Baptist. They shared similar messages: that the Kingdom of God was at hand and that it was necessary to repent of your sins and be baptized in order for that event. According to the Gospels, the difference between John and Jesus was that John proclaimed the divinity of Jesus at the time of his baptism, or at least his greater authority as, quote, “one is coming who is greater than me, whose sandals I am not worthy to fasten”. Jesus, according to the Gospels, was aware of his divinity as revealed to him at his baptism and taught and preached with that knowledge about the Kingdom of God that was to come, and how we should comport our lives to enter into that kingdom.

The baptism of Jesus resonates down through history as one of the core tenets of our faith, along with the Eucharist, or Communion. Jesus exhorted his disciples in the “Great Commandment” to go forth into the world preaching the good news of Jesus Christ, and baptizing in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, harkening to John's statement that, quote “I baptize you with water, while he that comes after me will baptize in the Holy Spirit”

With these beginnings in the Jewish traditional practices and the proclamations of Gospels, the sacrament of baptism evolved in the early churches. I was fortunate to find several online references that cover baptism in the early Christian Church.

We know from the Acts of the Apostles that converts to the faith could be of all ages, though in the early church most were adults who could make a conscious decision to receive Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Paul writes of converting and baptizing entire households and families, including infants and children. By the third century, infant baptism was a regular part of the tradition of the Christian church. In those instances, its practice included the participation of sponsors who could aid in the child's spiritual development.

In many cases the person being baptized or converted would receive a new name, signifying their new life in Christ. Perhaps the best known of this is the one known as Saul, who, following his conversion experience on the road to Emmaus, became the apostle Paul, one of our greatest evangelists. Today, our pastor asks the parents what the name of the child is as a recognition of this child being born anew in Christ.

According to a first century account, called the Didache, written in the century after Christ's death and resurrection, the person performing the baptism and the person or persons to be baptized or acting as their sponsor were to fast for one or two days, to ritually cleanse the body inside and out, and prepare the mind spiritually to receive the Holy Spirit, which for converts to the early church was a life altering experience, as it should be for us.

This practice of fasting was, and still is a spiritual activity in many faith communities, and in the Congregational churches of early New England there were fast days to cleanse the body and focus the mind on spiritual matters and prayerful contemplation. This may explain why we celebrate a baptism with food as would have been done following the baptism in the early church to break that fast, as is still done in many religious traditions today.

The practice of fasting may help explain the experience of the early converts to the church in Ephesus that were baptized by the apostle Paul, as described in the lectionary this morning, in Acts 19 verses 1 through 7. But to understand this more fully, we should first read the chapter that follows it, chapter 18 verses 24 through 28, reading: “Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, well versed in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, he spoke and taught accurately of the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him and expounded to him the way of God more accurately. And then, when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brethren encouraged him, and wrote to the disciples to receive him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully confuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that Christ was Jesus.”

I like this guy! He's just like you and me in so many ways! He is great in his faith, strong in his belief in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, and eager to share what he knows, but a little thin on some of the details such as baptism. Returning to Acts 19, we continue: “While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. And he said to them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’ And they said, ‘No, we never heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’ And he said, ‘Into what were you baptized?’ They said, “Into John's baptism.” And Paul said, ‘John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.’ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them; and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. And there were about twelve of them in all.”

Now, another early text from which we learn about the practices of the early church is that collection known as the Apostolic Tradition, which dates from sometime in the early fourth century.

From the Apostolic Tradition we learn of the presence of supporters or sponsors at the baptism of adults and infants alike. In the early church, disciples of Christ, filled with the holy spirit, encouraged Jews and non-Jews from the pan-Hellenic world of Asia Minor to, quote, “see the light” and to repent and receive Christ as their Savior, teaching and mentoring them, much as Priscilla and Aquila instructed Apollos, and Paul did through his preaching and writing. Today, parents have sponsors or godparents in addition to family members who pledge to bring up the baptized child in the faith, and in our church, as in many others, the congregation also pledges to take an active part in the raising of a child in the faith.

According to the Didache, baptism was recommended to take place in, quote “living water”, end quote, which at that time meant running water, though it is interesting to note that Jesus uses the same term “living water” in his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:10. If living water could not be had, then other water was to be poured, or later sprinkled, three times on the head of the person being baptized, while reciting the words given to us by Jesus, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” In some instances, our pastors have, as they recited these words, made the sign of the cross on the forehead of the child as they make the last applications of water.

In the early church, the person baptized was to shed their clothing to be baptized naked, symbolic of their rebirth, and then dressed in new clothing, often in white for purity. In the time of Jesus, the Essenes, who we spoke of earlier, dressed in white to emphasize their purity, and Jesus has traditionally been depicted in white robes for the same reason. Today, when we baptize infants and small children, they are frequently dressed in white for purity, and white baptismal and christening gowns we use are reminders of the robes worn by those baptized in the early church.

In some cases, according to the Catholic Encyclopedia, the baptized person faced to the west, considered the place of darkness, and before the bishop and other witnesses, confessed and renounced their sins and their old way of life, and then turned to the east, ritually turning towards the light of Christ and proclaiming their belief in Christ as the Christ and their redeemer, affirming the Gospel declaration of Jesus as the light of the world. Again, Jesus=Light=God=Good. In our present church building, when we have a baptism, the family stands by the altar and the cross, and the minister administers the baptism, then faces to the east and to the congregation with the infant or child and presents them to God and to the church.

Now, I told you that sixty-three years ago, I was baptized in this church by Rev. Arthur Bowler, who used this baptismal font to bless me with water that I was told came from the River Jordan, the same place where Jesus was baptized. Now, I don’t know if that was true, but it’s a beautiful story, and I like to think that it is or was true. It was a ceremony similar to that used after Rev. Bowler by Rev. Dr. Laurene Bowers and Rev. Dr. Mary Lou Gifford most recently, using this same font. Most likely this ceremony is the same one that was used by Rev. Elisha Eaton in this church nearly three centuries ago, when he used water poured three times from this pewter basin, baptizing young and old alike with the holy water of God's saving grace, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Wherever you have come from in your life's journey, most of you have been received into this or another church through the sacrament of baptism, the holy and spiritually purifying ceremony that connects us all to all believers in all times, and to life and the living presence of our Lord and Redeemer, Jesus Christ.

John and Jesus, You and I, united together in the Holy Spirit. May it ever be so. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Hi, I’m Deacon Ellen. Today’s pastoral prayer is taken from "The Book of Common Worship" of the Presbyterian Church.

Eternal God, at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan you proclaimed him your beloved Son, and anointed him with the Holy Spirit. Grant that all who are baptized into his name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him, as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns one God, in glory everlasting."

Let us now say the words our lord has taught us:

*Our Father, who art in heaven,*

*hallowed be thy name;*

*thy kingdom come;*

*thy will be done,*

*on earth as it is in heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread.*

*And forgive us our debts,*

*as we forgive our debtors.*

*And lead us not into temptation,*

*but deliver us from evil.*

*For thine is the kingdom,*

*the power, and the glory,*

*For ever,*

*Amen.*

Stewardship Moment

Hello, members and friends of the First Congregational Church in Randolph. My name is Dick Anderson. The Stewardship Committee wishes you all a warm, joyous and healthy Christmas. We can imagine for some of you that joy may be harder to come by this year because of restrictions that discourage large gatherings and close contact with loved ones and friends. However, you can be sure that you are a valued part of our faith community, that continues strong in spite of the present circumstances. And we will be together again sometime in 2021 and worship together.

At the very first Christmas, giving was an integral part of the Nativity story, for it was the Wise Men that gave three simple gifts- gold, frankincense, and myrrh- to the Christ Child, and then hastened away without divulging to the guileful King Herod where Jesus could be found, thus sparing his life. As for this trying Christmas season, if you are able, one way you can dull the feelings of isolation and loneliness is to be generous in your giving, not just to the church, but to individuals in need and to qualified charitable organizations in your community and beyond. For there is something magical about giving that raises oneself and satisfies our souls. Whether your gift is monetary or just a helping hand where it is needed or an understanding ear, it cannot help but come back to you in so many unexpected and positive ways. And when more than just a few of us find ways of giving, there is a multiplying effect that can change the world. If you think about it, giving is noble and can be quite habit-forming.

As this year comes to an end, your church is also reflecting on its gift-giving and on carrying forward on its mission of spreading the Gospel and helping to make our community and world a much better place. I must tell you that we are 20% below last year’s dollar level of pledges, which is unfortunate. As our 2021 budgets are being contemplated, we really need to have a good handle on our income sources. So if you haven't done so already, please consider our financial needs and fill out a pledge card. If you don’t have one, please contact the church office for one, so that your presence is felt and then magnified towards the glory of God. You know, God loves a cheerful giver. Thank you, and Merry Christmas to all of you.

Please go to firstuccrandolph.com to donate now.

For pledge information please contact Nadine at firstuccrandolph19@gmail.com.

Hymn: Spirit Song

Oh, let the Son of God enfold you with his Spirit and his love; Let him fill your heart and satisfy your soul
Oh, let him have the things that hold you, and his Spirit, like a dove, Will descend upon your life and make you whole

Jesus, O Jesus, come and fill your lambs

Jesus, O Jesus, come and fill your lambs

Oh, come and sing this song with gladness as your hearts are filled with joy

Lift your hands in sweet surrender to his name

Oh, give him all your tears and sadness, give him all your years of pain, And you'll enter into life in Jesus' name

Jesus, O Jesus, come and fill your lambs

Jesus, O Jesus, come and fill your lambs

Oh, let the Son of God enfold you with his Spirit and his love; Let him fill your heart and satisfy your soul

Oh, let him have the things that hold you, and his Spirit, like a dove, Will descend upon your life and make you whole

He'll descend upon your life and make you whole

Benediction

Let us close with our benediction.

Oh, Holy One, who lights up the darkness with your loving grace, and speaks to us in powerful ways, even in your silences, abide with us in courage and strength to go out into the world, proclaiming the Good News every day, in ways large and small, til your will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven, Amen.