

Rev. Lynne Ogren
January 7, 2018

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
Baptism of our Lord Mark 1:4-11

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

This week we held the first session of our Stephen Ministry training. Our seven Stephen Minister trainees and two leaders spent some time getting to know one another better. In one activity the group split up into pairs and answered some fill-in-the-blank questions about themselves—things like “One of my nicknames is _____,” or “Something that makes me sad is _____,” or “Something I feel good about doing last year was _____.”

That last one was kind of timely as we begin this new calendar year. Most often at the turn of the New Year we look forward with resolutions for to how we want things to change, how we want to be different based on what didn't go well the previous year. I think it's also a good exercise to look back at the year we have completed to see what worked.

What is something you feel good about doing last year?

What challenge did you face? Did you meet that challenge? Avoid it? And is that challenge following you into the New Year?

How did you grow or change over the last 12 months or so?

I'm going to give you a moment to think about these things.

Let's just do a show of hands. Who thought of something you feel good about last year?

Who thought of a challenge—one that you faced and dealt with or one that was maybe overwhelming?

Who thought of an area of growth or change?

Now, let's think about how you got through this past year. Who surrounded you with support or encouragement or even tangible help— maybe financial help or words of encouragement or actually showing up to physically help you?

What inner strength did you need AND find last year?

Are you still seeking that strength? Are you still in need of support and encouragement?

Let's consider all these questions in light of the baptism of Jesus and of our own baptisms.

In Mark's gospel of Jesus Christ, the first introduction we have to Jesus is from John the Baptist. We don't hear about Jesus' birth with a heavenly host singing his praises or shepherds or wise men coming to worship him and naming him as a king. Mark doesn't tell us anything about Jesus' parents or his childhood at all. But John knows about him. Before Jesus even shows up John has faith in him.

John says that Jesus is more powerful and worthy of being so highly exalted that he is completely diminished in his presence.

When Jesus shows up at the Jordan River he does not speak. He does not perform any miracles. He just shows up. All he does is receive the gifts of Holy Baptism—the water, the Spirit, and the word of God that declares, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

The act of baptism begins Jesus’ ministry. It is from the water that he goes on to survive the wilderness, to heal, to teach, and to die for the sake of a world in need of God’s love and forgiveness. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, carrying the identity of God’s Son, and assured of God’s acceptance and commitment to him, Jesus faces all the challenges of this human life.

I hope you can see where I’m going here. Most of us also came to the waters of baptism at some time in our lives. If you were baptized as a baby, you also had not done anything yet to earn or deserve God’s love and acceptance. Yet, through the water and the Word the Spirit descended on you and you were given the name Child of God.

These gifts are our source of power to face and meet the challenges of life. We can step forward knowing that God is for us. When we feel weak or afraid, we can trust that the Spirit goes with us and ahead of us to equip us with what we need. As we journey through our wilderness valleys, it is the water of baptism that sustains us and helps us grow and bring life to others.

But what if you have not been baptized? Consider this your invitation to explore that possibility for yourself. In the coming weeks I will be meeting with those who want to learn more about what the baptismal life is about.

And maybe you were baptized as a baby or young child but that gift was not nurtured over the years. This exploration time is for you, too.

We want to be a community that lives like our baptisms matter!

We want you hear over and over again that we are God’s beloved children, that God loves us, and that with the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives we can face anything!

We want to support all the ways God calls us to use the gifts we are given to make changes in our lives, in our homes, and in the world!

Our future Stephen Ministers are learning to walk their baptismal journeys in this unique one-on-one caring ministry. The *Taking Faith Home* bulletin inserts are a gift to use at home so that we can learn to use the language of faith in our day to day lives.

Maybe one of your resolutions this year can be to enter into one of the ministry activities we have here at Zion—or help start a new one—as we commit to living out of the power of our baptisms to care for the world God loves so much.

When the heavens were torn apart at Jesus' baptism the veil between heaven and earth, between God and humanity, was opened up in a new way. God came to earth to be with us, to experience life with us, and to assure us that because of Jesus nothing can ever separate us from the love of God.

With that kind of promise, we can face anything, together, with the strength and power of the Spirit in us and among us.

Thanks be to God! Amen