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**But First, the Bad News**  
**Mark 1:4-11**

The **beginning of the good news**<sup>[a]</sup> of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.<sup>[b]</sup>

<sup>2</sup> As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,<sup>[c]</sup>

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,<sup>[d]</sup>

who will prepare your way;

<sup>3</sup> the voice of one **crying out** in the wilderness:

‘**Prepare** the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight,’”

<sup>4</sup> John the baptizer appeared<sup>[e]</sup> in the wilderness, proclaiming a **baptism of repentance** for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were **baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.** <sup>6</sup> Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with<sup>[f]</sup> water; but he will baptize you with<sup>[g]</sup> the Holy Spirit.”

**The Baptism of Jesus**

<sup>9</sup> In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. <sup>11</sup> **And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved;<sup>[h]</sup> with you I am well pleased.”**

Like most of you, I was stuck in front of the television on Wednesday, **watching the attack on our Capitol,** and the aftermath of that horror.

I’ve tried to watch and read widely across different sources, to see what happened and what kind of response there is to this attack.

I was saddened to see that it was a coordinated effort, with multiple bombs and weapons, and people reaching the far corners of the Capitol building.

It was heart-wrenching to see a noose, and confederate flags,  
To see the American flag pulled down,  
and many flags with Jesus' name on them.

Like most of us, I was hoping this was just a few bad apples  
in the bunch of peaceful protestors,  
but it now seems that much of this was planned,  
and much of it was encouraged by leaders in our own country.

On our Presbytery's pastors call this week we talked about **a phrase** that was  
repeated over and over on television this week,  
especially by the lawmakers that night after the attack,  
and the commentators in the news.

The phrase is: **'This is not who we are'**.  
By that, people mean that we are Americans,  
and this is not how we behave.

***But what if that's NOT true?***

I want to suggest a different view on that, as Christ-followers.  
As people who follow Jesus Christ, **this IS who we are**.

***We are all broken people, sinful people,***  
people who have some of the anger, hatred, prejudice,  
tribalism and pride that we saw on display on Wednesday.  
Even if we don't act on any violent tendencies,  
we do have those broken places inside where that could grow.

Presbyterians don't like to talk about our sinful tendencies,  
Or the brokenness that can lead to deplorable behavior.

***We emphasize grace and forgiveness.***

We emphasize the **Good News**, right?

But the truth is, **the Good News is only meaningful AFTER we hear the Bad News**.  
And the Bad News is we are all broken and sinful.  
The grace of Jesus is so powerful because we **NEED it so badly!**

There's a reason that ***Jesus encouraged us to not judge*** the speck in our neighbor's eye—why?  
Because we have a plank in our own eye!

It's so easy for us to put people in categories, us vs. THEM,  
And we could never be like THEM.

***But we are all people, in need of a Savior.***

***Does this mean we cannot condemn*** unjust and deplorable behavior?

No, we must stand up for justice and righteousness,  
Precisely because we are God's people, we are Christ-followers,  
And we are called to a higher standard.

But when we condemn that which is wrong,  
we do it from ***a place of humility.***

We have the attitude that 'there but for the grace of God go I'.

We ***follow our Savior's example of humility*** in all situations and circumstances.

I like what Pastor and author Barbara Brown Taylor said about this:

*"We spend a lot of time in the Christian church talking about God's love for sinners, but we sure do go to a lot of trouble **not to be mistaken for one of them.** Guilt by association and all that. Only Jesus, our Leader, and Lord—did not seem too concerned about that..." (Barbara Brown Taylor, pg. 35 Home by Another Way).*

Sometimes we are afraid of being mistaken for one of THEM—  
one of the sinners in the world.

When in reality, ***we ARE the sinners in the world.***

***But Jesus didn't mind being associated with THEM at all,***

he walked right on down into that river right along with all the sinners,  
he didn't care if people thought he was just like the rest.

He came to the water to show that he was with them,

He went into the water knowing he would soon take on all the sin for them.

***Philippians 2*** describes Jesus' attitude this way.

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but*

*emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.*

The acknowledgement of our sinfulness  
Is where the **ministry of John the Baptist is so important,**  
The ministry of **confession, repentance,**  
owning up to who you are and what you've done.

John the Baptist was the one **preparing the way** for Jesus,  
The voice crying out in the **wilderness,**  
Precisely because he was reminding people of their brokenness, their sinfulness.  
Remember what kind of baptism he offered? **A baptism of repentance!**  
And repentance requires honesty, self-reflection, and confession of sin!

John the Baptist **pointed people to the Bad News, if you will.**  
All so they could **receive the Good News** of forgiveness and grace,  
All so they could ultimately receive the Good News incarnate,  
God with us, our Savior Jesus.

It's easy for us to think that John is a side character in the story of Jesus,  
And in His baptism.  
**But isn't he really central to the coming of salvation in Jesus?**  
He looks like Elijah the prophet,  
He is preaching out in the wilderness,  
just like that wilderness where the Israelites wandered for 40 years after the  
Exodus from Egypt.  
He is preparing people for Jesus' arrival,  
just like that wilderness time prepared the people to enter the promised land!

John's message of confession, and repentance.  
Is him **holding up a mirror** to the people, so they can see who they really are,  
and how much they really need God!

Have you ever felt the **need to confess something to someone else?**  
Isn't it a real human need, the need to confess, to be real, and honest,  
and to have someone else hear your confession?

The Catholic church has known this for centuries,  
we Protestants sometimes think we don't need this---  
but isn't confession important for all human beings?

It is why we have **a corporate prayer of confession** each week in worship—  
because we are broken people,  
who need to see who we really are,  
before we can truly understand and appreciate the grace of Christ!

And John the Baptist **uses that need to confess**,  
In order to draw people to his ministry.  
People flock to him and his message, and John offers them a way to new life—  
a baptism of repentance.

But he also acknowledges that there is **someone greater** than himself,  
who will offer an even more powerful baptism—the **baptism of the Holy Spirit**.

Some people have wondered and debated why Jesus would come to John for  
baptism—**why would Jesus NEED a baptism of repentance?**  
Wasn't he a perfect human being?  
God in the flesh?

**But what if that's not the point of this story.**

It is in baptism that we learn **who Jesus really is**.  
When that dove descends upon him, and the voice from heaven speaks,  
it is to **IDENTIFY Jesus** as the Son of God:

<sup>10</sup> *And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart  
and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven,  
“You are my Son, the Beloved;<sup>[h]</sup> with you I am well pleased.”*

Jesus coming to John for baptism was his way of **being identified**.  
It was also his **show of solidarity** with all of us, sinners.

And it was **a new beginning** for Jesus.  
He would leave this experience to be tempted in the desert,  
and then begin his official ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing.

***Jesus' baptism is such good news*** for us, because  
 We are sinners, in need of God's cleansing grace.  
 And Jesus has gone before us, into the water  
 To prove he is **with us**, he is **one of us**,  
 And he will **take on all our sin for us**  
 In his baptism, we discover that **Jesus is the Savior**, the Son of God.

***And oh, how we NEED His amazing grace.***

We each have ***sin and brokenness*** in our hearts and minds,  
 it may not be a crime, or something so blatant ....  
 It might be the little things we've done and failed to get done.  
 The way we've been meaning to call a friend in need,  
 and have yet to pick up the phone, or  
***how we've been*** nagging our spouse, yelling at the kids, ignoring a neighbor,  
 belittling others.

It's the way we ***cannot forgive***, or we always ***complain***,  
 the way we ***criticize*** instead of praise,  
 how we ***fail to say thank you*** or reserve judgment,  
 the times we feel led to pray and choose to ignore it,  
 or all the times we've seen our Bible and left it closed.

It's the way that we ***can't let go of a grudge***, how we must be right,  
 How we lie about what we want and what we've done,  
 How we punish others for not reading our minds,  
 Or we swell with pride, 'at least I'm not like that',  
 when in reality we know that ***those things that drive us most crazy*** in others  
 are often are our very own worst faults.

We are the sinners in need of God's grace,  
 And because Jesus has gone before us,  
***we can receive new life in the waters of baptism.***  
 We can receive God's amazing grace through Jesus Christ.

***John the Baptist was a signpost, pointing the way to Jesus,***  
 And to the grace that we all so desperately need.

***And Jesus was baptized, as our example, our model.***

In his baptism— he entered the darkness of human sin,  
and brought us life and light.

He showed us ***the first step into new life.***

Today we remember John the Baptist, and Jesus coming for baptism.

We remember our own baptism,

***and the significance of being washed in the water,***

and given God's grace and new life.

Friends, today we are reminded of who we are,

***Of all the Bad News,***

So that we might truly receive and understand

***the grace and Good News*** of Jesus Christ.

And for that, all God's people say, Amen.

*Rev. Christopher Edmonston in the Presbyterian Outlook wrote a prayer that we will close with today:*

*O Lord, hear our prayer: Dismay. Shock. Lament. How did it come to this?*

*Almighty God, we confess the sins of the worst parts of our history.*

*We ask that your Holy Spirit guide us toward a deep repentance.*

*We confess that too often we have relied upon temporal promises which come and go with every news cycle.*

*Instead, help us to rely upon Jesus. Jesus who calls us to love. Jesus who offers grace. Jesus who offers mercy.*

*We remember your promises of restoration and covenant, and we call upon them now. We pray that the Holy Spirit will bring a newfound peace to our land. A surprising peace, yes. But a deeply needed one. Peace to heal wounds. Peace to end a time more defined by outrageous rhetoric than by acts of kindness.*

*We remember the warnings of Jesus about violence begetting violence:*

*Save us from further acts of political and racial violence.*

*Save us from mistrust, chaos, and injustice.*

*May the coming days be ruled by truth, goodness and integrity.*

*From sea to shining sea, from small town streets to the halls of power, help each and every one of us to walk in the manner of Jesus Christ.*

*We offer this prayer in Jesus' name. Amen.*