Guest Sermon 2/7/21

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**Feb 10**

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**Sermon By:** Rev. Erin Wathen

**Scripture**: Mark 1: 9-15

Mark 1: 9-15:

**9**At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. **10**Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. **11**And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

**12**At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, **13**and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

**14**After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. **15**“The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Who’s up for a trip? If you’re like me it’s been awhile since you’ve been much of anywhere other than your house-- besides maybe work or the grocery store. Life these days feels a lot like that Hotels.com commercial, where Captain Obvious says *Do you remember ...PLACES??* So I thought maybe we could take a little trip together today.

First, imagine that your church’s mission life is a stream. Maybe its source is the sanctuary, where you gather for worship; or maybe right now, it is found in the homes and hearts of each of its members. Wherever it is, find that source- and then follow the stream from its place of beginning.  Where does it go? What path does it take as your congregation embodies the gospel and carries it out into the world? What people, what words, what resources carry the witness of your faith community from the source and out to your neighbors?

Think about how that stream flows-- how it moves and shapes the landscape as it goes-- because water changes everything it touches, you know. Whose lives are touched by that mission stream as it flows? What stories of good news do people tell in its wake? Who has been fed, or healed, or restored to some new life because they came into contact with that living stream?

As the stream moves, it picks up speed. The path it carves grows wider. As it passes through the outskirts of town, maybe you start to lose sight of it; but you can trust its ripples continue. Maybe it even becomes a river. That river carries the gifts of your congregation out to a wider mission field where love flows freely and the landscape is altered. Follow that river out past the county line; out beyond the highway, beyond all the paved roads… follow it past everything you can account for in the mission budget, and out into a place where God might be doing a new thing. In this place, the terrain is rough, the landscape is wild, and anything is possible.

When we stop at the edge of that river in that wilderness place, we might see two figures out in the waves. One of them lowers the other down into the water, and when they emerge together from its surface… everything changes.

The baptism of Jesus marks the beginning of many extraordinary things. It is a moment of transformation, not just for Jesus himself, but for those who witness it; and for all those who will be touched by the moving stream of his life in the months, years, and generations to come.

In Mark’s gospel, this episode is placed as a prologue to the rest of the story- the precursor to every healing and teaching, every feeding miracle, and the coming resurrection. With the dramatic tearing open of the heavens, this is a moment of cosmic significance, revealing that the space between heaven and earth is, in fact, a very thin one. The divides between God and humanity, between the sacred and the everyday, are reduced to a nearly transparent veil. What flows from this moment is a story of all that God will accomplish through Jesus--not just in this time, but through all time.

What follows our own baptism is a small retelling of this same story: a moment when the space between heaven and earth is revealed to be so much smaller than we think it is; and a moment of communal rejoicing at *what God can accomplish through us*. What flows from that moment is our whole life of faith--a stream of service and generosity that can transform the landscape around us.

Water changes everything it touches, you know.

Our Week of Compassion offering this year is an invitation to *Let Love Flow*. That little trip we took along the moving stream of your congregation’s mission, and our wider church’s mission-- it was not entirely metaphorical. Each of our Disciples churches have local impact, many ways and places that we serve and care for our neighbors. AND when we give to Week of Compassion, we step into a rushing river that carries our presence so much farther and wider that what we can see-- a love that flows to those in need around the world, around the year.

We’ve felt the pressing needs of neighbors in ways that were especially acute this year.

As it turns out, lines on a map don’t stop the spread of disease; and a pandemic does not recognize human-made boundaries. We have learned that, whether we like it or not, our lives are deeply intertwined. Our well-being is bound, inextricably, to that of neighbors close to home, and those halfway around the world.

As the relief, refugee, and development mission fund of the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, Week of Compassion responded to the global pandemic as we would to any disaster - by working with congregations, church leaders, and our network of global partners to learn what is most needed, where our resources would be put to the best use, and moving quickly to meet urgent needs.

In many ways, though, the crisis of the pandemic was like nothing anyone had ever seen before. For one thing, it affected life in every part of the world and not just a particular community or region. It also impacted every area of our work, from refugee support to disaster response to ongoing development projects around the world. Everything had to be reassessed, reevaluated, and modified for COVID-19 considerations. And, of course, the pandemic unfolded -- and continues to evolve-- in the midst of other local and global crises.

A term that we’ve become all too familiar with in the past year or so is “compound disasters.” With the intersection of a pandemic and the growing frequency and severity of natural disasters, far too many communities and congregations have grown familiar with that term in recent months.

In Nashville, our friends at New Covenant Christian Church were already working against the pre-existing condition of systemic racism when a tornado devastated their neighborhood. They mobilized to respond to the storm; but then the pandemic meant they had to change their whole approach.

A horrific explosion in Beirut killed hundreds and injured thousands; at a time when the healthcare system was already struggling under the weight of COVID-19.

In Oregon, Disciples congregations were working hard to serve those in need from the pandemic when historic wildfires complicated needs even further.

And our friends and partners in Central America suffered an especially tragic blow with the back-to-back impact of two major hurricanes, just one week apart. Many of those most affected were communities where Week of Compassion has invested in relationships and development programs over many years. The loss of life, crops, homes and livelihoods in this record-breaking hurricane season was truly heartbreaking.

What do we do, Church: when there is fire and flood, disease and disaster, racism and ruin, all at the same time, and in so many places? The need feels overwhelming; the suffering too far-reaching, too widespread, for our small gifts to touch it.

But then we remember the good news: that in the moment of our baptism, we step into a moving stream that started long before we got here, and will continue long past our time. Our whole lives are caught up in a river of mercy that *lets love flow*, even to places that seem unreachable.

And this Body of Christ is a living body that moves through the world, transforming everything it touches.

That means your love flows to places like Nashville, to support Disciples who are feeding their neighbors in need from multiple crises- while also working for racial and economic justice to address housing needs in their community.

Your love flows to Beirut, serving people in need of housing as a result of the explosion, and those without access to food or water; as well as those who were injured or lost loved ones; and those seeking economic opportunity to regain their autonomy.

Your love flows to Oregon, supporting Disciples congregations as they feed their unhoused neighbors; while also coordinating to serve those whose lives were upended by the fires.

Your love flows to Honduras and Nicaragua, supporting rapid response in the wake of multiple hurricanes. Your love provides food kits and safe water right now for those who have lost everything. And your love also stays for the long haul--looking ahead and supporting our partners as they seek long-term solutions to complex problems.

And furthermore, your *past* generosity means that many communities, like those in Central America, were better equipped to stay safe during COVID-19. While the challenges remain significant, access to improved sanitation and clean, safe water for handwashing helped some of the most vulnerable populations weather the pandemic.

Through ongoing development projects that our churches have supported for years, more people are empowered to prevent the spread of disease among their family and neighbors. And as we look to the future, our continued investment in development and livelihood support programs will be crucial in recovery from this difficult season.

With this Week of Compassion offering, we “let love flow” from a source of deep hope and longing, to a place of transforming love.

Many of us may be thinking about what we should give up for Lent this year. But in a time when we have given up so much of what is normal, what is comforting, and what is sacred... maybe this year, we should think less about what we can give up… and more about what we can give TO.

When you give to Week of Compassion, you aren’t just giving to an offering. You are giving life to future dreams, and bringing present hope into reality. You are feeding the hungry today, and empowering communities to feed their children for generations to come. You are helping women and children access education and opportunity. You are sharing comfort and empowering refugees. You are rebuilding homes, churches, and lives impacted by disaster.

You are stepping into a moving stream.

So Let love flow… from the waters of our baptism to the places of deepest aching need. Let it flow from our churches and homes to our neighborhoods, and far beyond. Let it flow in ways that keep this body moving, and bind us together- even when we are apart.

Every body of water has one thing in common: a source. For Disciples, that source is the love of God, made known in Christ and community. When you release that power and ***let love flow...*** miraculous things happen in the wake of that stream.

Water changes everything it touches, you know.

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