

Wesley United Methodist Church

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Bread, Bath & Beyond

January 7, 2018

Title: Bread & Bath

Scripture: Genesis 1:1-5

Acts 19:1-7

Matthew 26:26

Mark 1:4-11

I don't hear as much about New Year's Resolutions as I used to and I suspect that it is because many of us have recognized that we typically fail in our resolutions within the first week. Maybe it's because we make them too difficult or we just don't have the motivation or whatever, but in one way or another people have been making some form of New Year's Resolution for more than 2,000 years, with the earliest indication being that Ancient Babylonians were making resolutions as long as 4,000 years ago. In ancient times it was often believed that these were a bargain with their gods – ensuring a good year ahead.

In 1740 John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, created what is called a Covenant Renewal Service that was usually held on New Year's Eve or New Year's Day. You can find an important piece of that in our United Methodist Hymnal at number 607 – A Covenant Prayer in the Wesleyan Tradition.

Today, most New Year's resolutions are mostly secular – instead of making promises to the gods, most people make resolutions to themselves and focus purely on self-improvement – which may explain why the resolutions are so hard to follow through on. Still the Goal of a New Year's Resolution is to move beyond some limitation that we experience in our lives, either one of our own making or something beyond our control.

At the beginning of a new year, it is sometimes good to remember that the very first words in our Bible are "In the Beginning, God." Quite

frankly, I think that this is the whole story in a nutshell. From the Beginning, God is present. According to the Bible, God began creative work at the very beginning bringing order out of chaos and form out of confusion. The story of creation shows us that everything that exists is dependent upon God.

I believe that the creation account in Genesis is more of a theological statement of who God is rather than an historically accurate account of how the world began. One of the commentaries, I read this week talked about the Big Bang theory and how order and the wonder of many galaxies sprang out of chaos. This parallels nicely with our Genesis account of God bringing order out of chaos. The author, pointed out that there does not need to be a conflict between religion and science and that if the Hebrew people had understood the magnitude of the world they would have been dancing for sheer joy at the displays of God's creative power in things like the rings of Saturn, the ice volcanoes on one of its moons and the possibility of an ocean on another.ⁱ

In the beginning of the creation story we hear that God said, "Let there be light" and God separated the light from the dark. There is a sense in which each morning is a kind of new creation. The darkness or chaos of the night is dispelled by the first rays of the morning sun creeping over the horizon with brightness and warmth soon following.ⁱⁱ In this sense, not only every new year, but every day is like a new beginning, a new opportunity to live life to the fullest.

Water is significant in creation and throughout the Scripture. We hear in Genesis that "a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." The "wind" that is mentioned here is "ruach" which in Hebrew is not only "wind" but also "breath" or "spirit" and we find this word, or a similar Greek word

used frequently in the Bible to talk about the action of the Holy Spirit. Water shows up again in today's reading from Mark – Jesus being baptized by John in the Jordan River.

John preached about baptism as a way of repenting from one's sins and preparing for the coming messiah, so theologians have long debated why Jesus came to be baptized by John. You remember that as we drew near to Christmas, we talked about Jesus being Immanuel, meaning God with us. Essentially, most of the discussion about Jesus' baptism boils down to exactly this – that Jesus was God with us, as in Genesis – in the beginning, so also in Jesus' birth and now in his baptism. Jesus took on or identified with our sin, and so was baptized by John. As we heard in the reading from Mark, John says that while he baptizes with water, Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

In the reading from Acts, we heard that Paul asked the people of Ephesus if they had been received the Holy Spirit when they became followers of Jesus. You may also remember that nearing the end of his earthly life, Jesus promised his followers that he would send a companion, the Holy Spirit, to be with them and to empower them in their lives. Today, we baptize in the name of God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Baptism is foundational to our faith – it marks us as a follower of Jesus.

One of the best books I read on the meaning of Baptism is a book by now Bishop William Willimon, called "Remember Who You Are." The title itself tells us a lot about baptism. As Willimon reminds us, there are always people who are willing to tell us who we are and to remind us of their expectations for us. Letting others tell us who we are is dangerous. Our need as humans is to be wanted, loved, and cared for by other persons.

Through baptism the church proclaims that you are loved and wanted and that you are a child of God. Through baptism, a Christian learns first and finally who he or she is. It marks our identity in Christ.ⁱⁱⁱ

Baptism might be considered the genesis (or beginning) of Christian life – it assures us that we are not too small to be noticed by God. It asserts that God has chosen, loved, and claimed us. No matter the age of the person being baptized, the congregation also takes on the responsibility to help that person grow in his or her own faith. We make a commitment to live a life that follows Christ's example and to surround that person with a love that doesn't quit.

There is no greater gift than to provide for another human being the knowledge that he or she belongs to God. It lets you know where you come from, who you are, and to whom you belong.

I invite you today, to remember your baptism. Even if you do not remember your actual baptism, you can remember what baptism means for your life. Willimon expresses it nicely, "I do not always feel like a child of God. I do not always look like a child of God. God knows I do not always act like a child of God! But I am. I am one of God's children not because of what I did or because of who I am but because God chose me, out of the entire universe, to be God's child. I am owned. When I am anxious or alone or defeated, baptism ought to speak a firm word of comfort to me: 'Relax, be calm. You did not choose me, I chose you.'"^{iv}

Baptism is a reminder that life can change, that the old and painful can pass away and yield to a new and meaningful life. This is the gift of Baptism.

Today, we also celebrate Holy Communion. I know that we do this

monthly, and it is possible that we may take it for granted because of its familiarity. But today, as we begin to talk about Bread, Bath, & Beyond, about those things that give us opportunities to learn more about who Jesus is, and who we are invited to be. Along with baptism, communion is basic to our faith.

When we gather for communion, we remember not only the last night that Jesus was with his disciples in the Upper Room, but we also “remember” into the future. When we gather, we gather with all who have ever done so, who do now, and who will ever do so. Communion is at the very heart of Christian worship.

A central fact about the meaning of communion is that it takes place in community – with Christ at the center. Christ is present with us and is represented to us in the bread and the cup that we share.

One of the important things about Scripture is that it is about ordinary everyday things. Jesus was baptized in the ordinary Jordan River. Jesus told stories that were based in daily life. Communion uses commonplace things – bread and wine (or in our case juice – the unfermented juice of the vine). There is no more common food than bread and although it may take many forms it is representative of what is needed to sustain life. Wine was the common drink of the land and the fruit of the vine was the symbol of abundance and celebration. These common things were touched by the presence of God and remind us once again of the incarnation – that God has been with us from the beginning; that in Jesus, God became human and identifies with everything in our lives.

Holy Communion connects us to Christ. The broken bread reminds us of Jesus’ body broken in death. The cup, the wine, reminds us of blood which is necessary for life. Past, present, and future come together in a

single act as we gather together.

We come to the table of our Lord, because we are God's people, loved and chosen by God. When we know the story of the Last Supper as well as many of us do, it is easy for it to lose some of its impact.

Remember that sitting at the table, eating with Jesus, was a man who had already made plans to betray him - *and Jesus knew it*. There was another who had always been so close to Jesus, we might have called him Jesus' best friend. He was the one on whom Jesus said he would build the church. Yet, before the night was over he would deny his relationship with Jesus - not just once - but three times. He would deny even knowing who Jesus was - *and Jesus knew it*.

Gathered around this table were others who had disappointed him, who had argued about which one of them was the most important, who had over and over demonstrated a lack of understanding of who Jesus was and what he did - *and Jesus knew it*. But he didn't send any of them away. He accepted each one of them and continued to love them.

We, too, come to the table of the Lord with our histories; the deep pains too secret to share; the anger we bear in shame; the very struggles of our souls - *and Jesus knows it*. He continues to accept each one of us, just as we are with all our pain, secrets, anger, shame, and struggles. For each one of us, Jesus has already offered his very life so that we can be set free from whatever it is that separates us from God. What we discover in communion is a moment which puts to death the power which that pain or anger or struggle has over us.

What we receive in communion is food for the spirit. For the weary it is rest for the soul. For the burdened it is strength for another day. For the lonely it is a community of faith. For the angry or hurt it is a vision of at

least part of the world made right. For the sick and those confronted by the reality of death, it is an eternal healing. For the one who comes in faith it is the very presence of Christ.

Bread and bath - Communion and Baptism – basic to our faith – offer us new beginnings; new opportunities to move beyond our limitations, whatever they may be, and to live a bold life of faith and hope in Christ. I want to invite you over the next few weeks to pay attention to two things. First, pay attention to the transformation or changes you witness in your own life or the lives of others. Secondly, ask God to reveal to you the next steps in your life, what it is that God is inviting you to do and who God continues to invite you to be.

ⁱ Keeping Holy Time, Year B; commentary on Genesis for this week

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Willimon, William, Remember Who You Are These notes were taken from my Emmaus Means of Grace talk about baptism, but that talk does not contain footnotes of specific pages in the book for this section.

^{iv} William H. Willimon, Remember Who You Are (Nashville, Tn: Upper Room, 1980) p.41.