

January 14, 2018
Mark 1:4-11
Called by God to a Brainwashing

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Let us pray. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer, amen.

My nephew's two year-old daughter Sophia was recently sitting with her parents in worship. When the time came for the minister to perform a baptism in the front of the sanctuary and pour water on the baby's head, Sophia turned to her mother and asked, "Why are they brainwashing that baby?"

Out of the mouths of babes... because, in a sense, baptism these days *is* a radical act of brainwashing – not in the old negative sense of breaking one down to become an automaton who acquiesces to some maniacal authority, but in a newer positive sense as a washing away of obsessive thinking (past, present, and future) in preparation for a reorienting towards wholeness – for a lifetime of reshuffling of assumptions about what constitutes truth in all its fullness and the make-up of reality itself. (pause)

Yes Baptism is a brain-washing and that's a good thing because we live in a time of shifting paradigms – when many are realizing that the truths upon which they have always depended are not nearly as rock solid as they had assumed – a time when we *all* are coming to realize that rationality – our brains – no longer have the absolute power to ultimately decide our destiny like we once thought.

We have come to realize that the promise of the Age of Enlightenment – that is, that science and the empirical method would save us – looks to have been little more than an exercise in self-deception.

Not that there is anything inherently wrong with rationality, mind you. Indeed, science and empiricism are gifts of the highest magnitude.

No, the problem has come because as a species we have confused the relative gift of rationality, our big brains, with something ultimately to be worshipped.

This confusion came in the 16th and 17th centuries when we in the West began to elevate rationality to the level of a god; indeed when rationality came to be viewed as the *only* legitimate route to living, deciding, working... being. When only that of material substance - of which we were sure, empirically, had objective existence apart from us, was considered “real”.

It is no coincidence that this period saw the birth of deism and Unitarianism with Thomas Jefferson finally putting forth a bible that literally cut out all of the stories that hinted at anything that could not be logically, rationally, explained.

This, of course, was hubris – hubris that came directly out of the giddy feeling that with science, humanity might just be capable of anything – and I must say, to their credit, Jefferson and many of his cohorts seemed to be prime examples of this possibility.

But it has become clear that salvation, becoming whole, emotionally, intellectually, psychologically – even practically, entails finding a way to give as much value to the esoteric and the obscure – to non-rational ways of knowing, acting and being as to the empirical and the rational.

That is, knowing and acting and being by way of the totally irrational experiences of love, relationship, grace, faith, intuition, sudden insight, visions, dreams;

-knowing, acting and being by way of a mysterious religious, *authentic* source that has been personally revealed but cannot be measured or absolutely verified.

-knowing, acting and being by way of a conscious, intentional connection to an ancient, but proven “inner Guide” we Christians know as the Christ.

But sadly, not even our seminaries make room for that kind of knowing. It is a travesty but my work on my master of divinity degree was by far, the most disappointing educational experience of all I have had. No-one there wanted to hear about my dreams and my visions. No-one there cared about my powerful experiences of God. In fact they were highly suspicious of them. I, along with my fellow seminarians, was told by my professor of theology that I didn't know enough to even ask a proper question so I was to simply keep my mouth shut and listen as he expounded upon Karl Barth and the neo-orthodoxy of the 20th century – a singularly rational theology that is devoid of all mystery.

So, even the Reformed church has inflated the lifting up of the rational approach as the *only* recognized legitimate way – when nothing could be further from the truth. And so we have what we have today – a kind of destructive irrationality on the loose – in politics, in economics, and ironically, even in education and religion.

It is as if that part of the human condition, the non-rational part that is just as real as the rational, having been denied and caged for so long, has now broken free as the promises of the empirical

method have failed to give humanity what it thought it wanted – a utopia stemming from control over nature – including its own.

Only now, that part of us abused and discarded for so long, has returned as a primitive, dark, destructive force. It has led to religious institutions becoming less safe havens and more sources of increased violence;

It has led to political parties acting as if they alone hold all the answers.

Indeed, the return of the non-rational from the dung-heap in a kind of raging resentment, can explain everything from suicide bombings, to the denial of global warming and the irrational destructive path of doom upon which so much of humanity now seems determined to follow.

And to the consternation of highly educated elites, like most of us in this room, this more unconscious, irrationality is completely resistant to rational discourse or education of any kind.

The non-rational the mysterious – that which cannot be directly known – is a legitimate part of what makes us human. It is real and needs to be honored. The way forward is not with parades, extolling the righteousness and absolute value of science over irrationality, but for science, in humility, to move over and admit its own limitations.

But of course, such a thing would turn – actually *is turning* the current power structures on their heads – and not in a good way. Many have the right idea; an injection of religious faith is needed; but the problem is that we cannot go back to find that in the perceived absolutes of the past. This doesn't mean that non-rational absolutes don't exist. It just means that they are not as objective and self-evident as once conceived. (Pause)

Non-rational ways of knowing, acting and being have no legitimate outlet among the elite in education, science, politics, and economics. And because of it, there is no avenue for their proper valuing alongside rationality. So rather than being allowed to complement the rational approach, these non-rational ways of knowing have gone rogue – at war with clarity and rationality – like what we are experiencing today. (Pause)

And what does all of this have to do with baptism? Well, baptism is one of those non-rational rites that maintains its value only by way of our non-rational deference as experiencers of the Christ. Mark was also an experiencer and one of the main things he wants us to understand about baptism is that it's time for us to embrace the non-rational way of knowing, acting, deciding, as being a legitimate, valuable way. He wants us to know in uncertain terms that baptism is a time to listen for strange, mysterious voices from out of no-where. In particular, baptism is a time for us to hear *God's* voice. During Jesus' baptism, Mark says that the sky opened, the Holy Spirit came down, and God's voice boomed out, "This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased" or in other words, "whom I love."

Reclaiming our baptism, is thus now a radically new way to insist on the wholesome legitimacy of knowing, living, working, as much out of proven *non-rational* sources as rational ones. Baptism causes us to ask strange questions, like, "What does it mean to pour water over someone

in a worship service in the name of a creator God who is also Christ among us, and Holy Ghost *in us*.

What does it mean to be pleasing to this God? What does it mean to hear this God's voice?
(pause)

For us who have been baptized, it is to realize that at our baptism, and throughout the rest of our lives, God is saying what many originally say *they* heard when Jesus was baptized: "You are God's son. You are God's daughter. You are God's child. You are someone who the creator of the universe loves personally and specifically."

The baptism of Jesus and thus, our own baptism reminds us that our recognizing our souls as being Christian is not the result of our own rational deciding using the empirical approach. Rather it is the result of the touch of a mysterious someone else by grace, someone that we have experienced but cannot prove empirically – namely a creator God. (pause)

One of my favorite Christian Theologians that I am sure would have been considered a heretic by my seminary theology professor is Matthew Fox. Fox puts it this way: He writes:

"I believe that the creation-centered spiritual tradition (of which Christianity is a part) represents the appropriate spiritual paradigm for our time. I also believe that this tradition and the living of it represent a Copernican revolution in religion. Copernicus moved people from believing that Earth was the center around which the universe revolved to believing that Earth moved about the sun.

In religion we have been operating under the model that humanity, and especially *sinful* humanity, was the center of the spiritual universe. This is not so. The universe itself, blessed and graced, is the proper starting point for spirituality. Original blessing (from a mysterious source we recognize as a creator God) is prior to any sin, original or less than original. ... Maybe it was necessary that humanity concentrate during a certain period on its fallenness. But the time has come to let anthropocentrism go, and with it to let the preoccupation with human sinfulness give way to attention to the *experience* of divine grace. Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (Bear & Co., 1983), 26.

Not belief in grace as a concept but the experience of grace as the powerful non-rational thing that it is.

A focus on the gift and efficacy of baptism does just this. It is a response to an all-inclusive invitation – an invitation from a "voice" telling us that no matter what happens, we are loved. But can we really hear the creator's voice saying that to us as we gather here today?

The problem is that it's so difficult to hear God's voice amid all the other voices chattering around us. Indeed, with our smart phones, today we have the ability to hear from just about any irrational raving lunatic anywhere in the world on any subject one might care to name. But the baptism story forces us to ponder whether, amid all those irrational voices around us, we are tuning in and hearing the authentic but non-rational voice of our creator. Are we hearing what God is saying? Are we hearing (and experiencing) that there is indeed one who created us and

that that creator is calling us and telling us that we are loved personally by that self-same creator? To say yes, is a paradigm changer.

Entrepreneur Tom Mahon recognizes this. He often provides an article for Fortune magazine. In one article he wrote the following: “Some years ago, returning from an industry trade show highlighting the newest “New Paradigm,” I began to wonder if any paradigms last longer than 18 months anymore. And if they *don't* – if this *is* the pace of things to come – how do we learn to keep up? Or can we?

“So, I consulted some *older* user manuals – the Bible, the Koran, the Gita, the Sutras, Greek mythology – and found one paradigm common to all: the Golden Mean, the Middle Path, the way of loving, patient, moderation. But what does that mean in the Internet bubble? We’re becoming like our machines: operating in a binary mode. It’s either all tech, all the time, or risk being called a Luddite. Master 24/7 ubiquity, or join the Flat Earth Society. But we’re paying a high price. In the work world, we see so much evidence of stress, burnout, job insecurity, broken homes, and obsolescence and desperation at 40.

“How do we pursue the universal Golden Mean in a silicon society? The ancients left us a large body of technology to help us explore the inner Net – prayer, meditation, yoga, chi gong. We owe it to ourselves to take a daily or weekly “data Sabbath” – unplug and catch our breath regularly to become composed. ... And in that composed state, think about what we want to do and be, *then* select our technology to accomplish *that*. ...

He continues: “There exists today in nearly every neighborhood a place of worship. Some of these, particularly those facing dwindling congregations, might welcome the chance to provide their members and neighbors a safe place where people can meet regularly to talk about workplace issues. Such “safe havens” could help people rediscover the ancient and heartfelt notion of a Sabbath: a regular period of restful alertness to refresh them for the workweek ahead – a place where change of the best kind – human nature might actually take place. Tom Mahon, “Ancient sages for the new century,” Business 2.0, June 1, 2000.

It is interesting to note that from the moment of the Sabbath place for Jesus of his baptism, HIS life was filled with changes, filled with new beginnings. There was the change of leaving his parents and brothers and sisters in Nazareth and striking out on his own. There was the change of constantly being on the move from one town to the next – of never having one place that was his own where he could lay his head at night.

In the same way through our baptisms, God’s non-rational voice says to us, “I love you my child. Now be changed.” Just as Jesus lived a life of change and new beginnings, that is what God hopes for us. In theory, we know change toward wholeness is good. But in practice, when that kind of change actually happens and we’re affected by it, then we’re not so sure that change is as good as we thought it would be. Yet the truth is that to be alive means to change. Every moment of our lives, our bodies are constantly changing: our cells are dividing, our blood is circulating, and our lungs are expanding and contracting. In fact, if those changes didn’t take place, we’d die.

In baptism, God invites us to be open to a change that makes no rational sense, so that we can share in the new life, the new day that God is bringing about.

And that's what we are about today – letting go of the past as we embrace a new beginning. For today we recognize the special, non-rational calling for leadership and service of four folks among us – Don Fues, Cathy Holder, Hillary Kaufmann, and Marcia Lake – even as we honor the dedicated past work and leadership of Bob Duncan, Don Fues, Margaret Guthrie and Martha Schondelmeyer. I am talking, of course about the non-rational ordination and installation of the office of elder.

This office, this non-rational calling is linked to our baptism. God claimed all these folks in their baptisms and now, we believe because they said, “Yes” to God's love, they are discovering what that means – and so do we as participate in their official blessing.

Let us pray. Gracious God, forgive us for worshipping our minds rather than you. Give us the courage to embrace your presence. Use our baptisms to brainwash us. Help us to reorient our lives from a focus on humanity as the only center of value to the whole of the cosmos you created and then after six days called “good”. Help us to find ways for our experience of you to include and invite and to bring talk of you to the public square rather than to exclude, make entrance difficult and to keep talk of you behind the doors of this building. We pray these things in your name, amen.