***WHAT’S NEXT?***

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Texts: Mark 1:1-13 and Acts 19:1-7

Two weeks ago, we were all anxious for 2021 to begin, leaving behind the disaster of 2020. But the post-Christmas surge in the virus and the events of this past week in our nation’s capital make you wonder if this year will be any better than the last or whether the plague which was 2020 is just leaking into 2021! The assault on our nation’s democracy in the form of an assault on the Capitol by an insurgent mob egged on by the false claims of a vindictive president who could not accept defeat has shaken citizens of all stripes across our country. It seemed inconceivable that anyone could take over the Capitol while Congress was in session – and then it happened – and with the breaking of windows and doors, shattered too was any false sense of invincibility or superiority or guaranteed stability in our democracy. Chaos reigned briefly, and then, thankfully order was restored. Democracy held as Congress completed its work to certify the election results and move forward with the transition to a new president. The lingering question just ten days into this new year is: what’s next?

What’s next, we hope, is the peaceful transition to a new president. What’s next, we hope, is a quicker rollout of the COVID vaccine that will help us get back to some sense of normal life and worship in these pews. What’s next, we hope, is healing for our fractured nation and beleaguered communities and virus-stricken world. What’s next, we hope, is progress toward a more just world. What’s next, we hope, is the possibility of a new beginning, a fresh start, and renewed hope for the future. What’s next, we hope, is a light at the end of this tunnel, though as someone was quick to add, remember that we are still in the tunnel – so wear your mask, wash your hands, keep social distance, be patient, be safe – while we get closer to getting out of this tunnel and on to where we want to be.

*What’s next?* How many times has that question run through your mind or slipped from your lips across these last days or last years? Sometimes it is voiced with great excitement or anticipation – What’s next? ☺ – and sometimes with great dread or resignation – What’s next! ☹ – and sometimes, many times, especially in these times, with great uncertainty – What’s next???

I wonder which of those emotions crossed Jesus’ mind as he rose up out of the river Jordan with John’s hand upon him and water cascading from his head and saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove and heard those divine words: “*You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased.”* Did he revel in that moment? Was he awed or comforted by what he heard and saw? What follows that kind of diving blessing, that kind of heavenly revelation, that kind of awesome experience, that kind of baptism? Did he then wonder, “What’s next?”

Jesus had come to John to be baptized in the river like countless folks before him. Unlike other gospel accounts that suggest John recognized Jesus and told Jesus that he should be the baptizer, not the baptized, Mark is silent on that count. In his version, Jesus’ baptism by John – a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins – was like all John’s other baptisms until that moment when Jesus came up out of the water. From that moment on, Jesus’ life was changed, his identity established – no longer was he just the son of Mary and Joseph, but now also God’s beloved Son! Jesus’ baptism is the first step on the road that will lead him down the dusty roads of Galilee, on to Jerusalem and the cross and the empty tomb. If he wondered, “What’s next?” as he stood there in the river, that’s what lay ahead for him. The more immediate answer to his question was, according to the text:

*The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*

All of that – temptation, ministry, arrest, crucifixion, resurrection - began with his baptism, a baptism by John but also by the Spirit, the same Spirit who drove him into the wilderness and worked through him across the next three years!

Who baptized you when you were baptized, if you were baptized? I was baptized in the First United Presbyterian Church on Big Spring Avenue in Newville, PA by a seminary classmate of my father, or so I am told. I don’t really recall it, since I was just a couple of months old at the time! Our kids, Dan and Emily, were baptized by my dad in the First United Church of Christ in Carlisle, PA, before I headed off to seminary. In my 25 years here at Covenant, I have baptized over 100 folks – adults, youth, and lots of infants who can snuggle into the crook of my arm and be drenched by the water from my big hand. Baptisms are cherished moments for parents, for families, and for children, whether they are old enough to remember or just hear stories told of that day. Baptisms are also cherished by congregations who share in that sacred rite by their pledge to the family and by their witness to the splashing of water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Baptism is the beginning of a new life in Christ – a sign and seal of the grace of God already at work in the life of the one baptized and a sign of the covenant with God to which we are all heirs through Jesus Christ. As our Directory for Worship so beautifully puts it:

*Baptism connects us with God’s creative purpose, cleansing power, and redemptive promise from generation to generation. (W-3.0402)*

In baptism we stand with those ancestors in faith stretching across two thousand years and around the globe, children of God and disciples of Christ all baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The hands that shower the water upon us may be male or female, young or old, black or white or brown, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian or Methodist, but they are all mere instruments, for the One who does the baptizing is the Holy Spirit. As you heard in our reading from Acts this morning: John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Our baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus is baptism by the Holy Spirit!

It is that same Holy Spirit who inspires the writing of Scripture and our reading of it. That same Spirit guides us through turbulent times, including these anxious days. It is that same Spirit who is received by those men and women who are ordained to ministry as elders. What they do as elders will be what God does through them by the power of the Spirit. As they are ordained, they may wonder, “What’s next?”, but they do so with confidence that God will be with them in the Spirit to guide them and empower them to deal faithfully with whatever that *next* thing may be! That same Spirit has already been at work in their lives across their lives. Listen as those who come today to be ordained and installed tell you in their own words:

*When I first thought about what to put in my statement of faith, I thought to myself, “How do you tell someone what you believe?” I struggled with this question and eventually came to my answer. I don’t think you can really tell someone what you believe, I believe you have to show them. I hope I show you that I believe that God created this world, that we are surrounded by the Holy Spirit every day, and that Jesus Christ came to us to forgive us our sins and show us how to live an exemplary life. (Taylor Chenery)*

*I believe that our world, from breathtaking highest peaks to ocean depths, from the farthest reaches of space to the smallest molecule, everything that we have discovered and have yet to discover, was created by GOD, our father in Heaven…I believe that Jesus Christ was sent by GOD to redeem us…I believe in the inspiration of the Holy spirit who comforts me, guides me, and leads me in my faith. (Michael Gwaltney)*

*I believe that God knew me before I knew Him and I have been steadily guided by Him. God is eternal, faithful, and unchanging, while I am none of those…Seeking to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, loving neighbors, and seeking peace and reconciliation are necessary in leading a Congregation. (Troy Rexrode)*

*With guidance from the Holy Spirit, we rejoice in God’s creation, joyfully serve one another with love and kindness, and glorify God’s name. Through faith, the Holy Spirit flows to us and through us and we carry the light of His promise by sharing the good news of Jesus Christ to the world. (Tom Compton)*

*Over the course of this walk I’m on, I’ve come to realize a few things that I never, ever doubt. First, God is always in control – even when I don’t like the way things are working out. Second, I’m very lucky that my heavenly parent gave His child so that this earthly parent can do…everything. And third It’s my responsibility to use whatever strengths I have to glorify them both every day of my life. (Cora Leigh Clark)*

*What is asked of me? Believe. Live a life in Christ. Serve others. My faith journey and life experiences have led to my belief and faith in the very real presence of the Holy Spirit. There is rarely a day that goes by that I do not feel and know this support…During difficult and trying times in my life, prayer and the Holy Spirit have been there…My prayers lead to the Holy Spirit standing by my side to make life better. (Brad Kurtz)*

*I believe God made us and loves us. Our world, all worlds, and everything within them are a gift from God. Jesus was a gift from God to us as a teacher and leader and continues to be a gift as our Redeemer. The Holy Spirit is a gift that sustains, inspires and moves us…Our loving response to these gifts is to try to figure out how we are called to God’s service, to follow Jesus, and how we might use the gift of our lives, energy, brains, talents, etc. to work for God’s will in the world. (Beverly Riddell)*

*The Holy Spirit manifests God’s gracious action, empowers our grateful response, gathers us, enlightens and equips us, claims and nourishes us, and sends us out to do God’s work. The Holy Spirit surrounds me daily with God’s boundless grace, and I am gratefully responding by serving God’s church. (Janey Terry)*

That is the testimony of these elders who will be ordained and installed today, those called by God to lead us through this year and these years to come. God will work through them, as God works through each of us, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the One by whom we are baptized and with whom we stand together to say confidently, hopefully, faithfully, determinedly, courageously, boldly in this new year: What’s next? Amen