

Sermon for January 15, 2017 – “Now What?”

2nd Sunday after Epiphany, Baptism of our Lord, Year A – Text: Matthew 3:13-17

Westwood First Presbyterian Church – Jeff Colarossi, Pastor

Have you seen the movie “Finding Nemo”? My favorite scene takes place at the very end after the credits begin to roll. The main story is already over. A clownfish by the name of Nemo had been taken from his home on the Great Barrier Reef. He ends up in the fish tank of a dentist in Sydney, Australia. And after a harrowing journey across the sea, Nemo is re-united with his father, Marlin. They all live happily ever after...the end. Well, not quite. For, although the main story has ended, we soon discover that another story has just begun. You see, the fish who’d helped Nemo escape from the tank had managed to free themselves, too. While their tank is being cleaned, they manage to roll the plastic bags they’re in along the counter, they make it out the window, across the street, and into Sydney Harbor. When the last one finally reaches the water, there is a collective cheer and sigh of relief. And then the reality of their situation dawns upon them. Bobbing in the ocean, still encased in a thin layer of plastic, Bloat, the puffer fish, breaks the silence. He says: “Now what?”

Now what? That’s my question this morning. Now, of course, the great drama of Advent is over. The festivities of Christmas are a fading memory. After a harrowing journey to the manger, Mary and Joseph have welcomed their son into the world. The heavenly host has sung, the shepherds have gone to Bethlehem and seen their Messiah in the manger. The Magi have followed the star, paid their respects, left their gifts, and gone home by another way. That’s good stuff. Actually, that’s **great** stuff! In fact, it doesn’t get much better than that. And therein lies the challenge of every preacher in Christendom on this third Sunday in January. Now what? What good news is there left to be said today? What’s left to say on the other side of Christmas?

Preachers aren’t the only ones with a dilemma. Because about this time every year we all realize something. Something that the holidays let us tuck under the tree for a few weeks. We realize that for all of the Christmas fuss, we’re still waiting. Waiting for Jesus. We’re still waiting for His kingdom to come, waiting for his Church to thrive, waiting for His will to be done in the parched landscape of our souls. Here on the other side of Christmas we find ourselves living in the same old world with the same old people, and struggling with the same old demons as always. Nothing’s really changed. On the other side of Christmas, we can’t help but wonder: “Now what?”

Even our liturgical calendar seems to be struggling today. On my preaching calendar, it shows that the liturgical color for the day is still white, the color of Christmastide. And yet, this Sunday is also the day we return to what’s called “Ordinary Time.” It’s further evidence that we’re living, as one scholar put it, “on the threshold between the divine and the mundane.” We’re living somewhere between the holidays and the “every” days. And if it seems that we’ve been here before, we have just 6 short weeks ago.

Today’s Gospel reading actually begins in the very same place that the reading from John’s gospel did on December 4th with John the Baptist standing on the shores of the River Jordan, baptizing people. Only five weeks later and we find ourselves right back where we started. It’s as if Christmas never came after all. And if we’re honest with ourselves that feels about right, right now.

Before we know it we're back in the wilderness. Before we know it we're back in line waiting for what John offers; forgiveness for our sins and a thorough dunking in God's grace. And, yet even as we're going under again we know. We know that sooner or later, we'll be right back here holding our breath for a miracle. After all, that's the way it's always been. That's the way **we** have always been. Why should we expect it to be any different this time around? And then Mark gives us our answer. For although our gospel reading five weeks ago and our reading this morning are similar, they're not the same.

Five weeks ago, the Gospel reading ends with John baptizing people. It ends with us shivering in the wilderness with nothing between us and God except John and the Jordan. But here on the other side of Christmas, Matthew keeps going. He writes: "Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. "John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?' "But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now...' "For it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." "Then he consented. "And when Jesus had been baptized, just as He came up from the water – suddenly the heavens were opened to Him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on Him. "And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." "Now what?" we ask. "Now Jesus!" says Matthew.

I'd read a story about a mother who was at home with her two young daughters one lazy afternoon. Everything seemed to be just fine, until the mother realized that the house was quiet. And as every parent knows, a quiet house in the daytime can only mean one thing...The kids are up to no good. She quietly walked into each of the girls' rooms. Not finding them there she began worry. Then she heard it. The sound of whispering followed by the flushing of a toilet. Following the sound, she soon realized where it was coming from, the bathroom. Whispers, flush. Whispers, flush. Poking her head into the room, she was able to see both of her daughters standing over the commode. Whispers, flush. One of them was holding a dripping Barbie doll by the ankles, the other one had her finger on the handle. Whispers, flush. Wanting to hear what her daughter was saying, she slipped quietly into the room. Whispers, flush. What she heard was: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and in the hole you go." Flush.

This is supposedly a true story. But you already guessed that, didn't you? We believe this is a true story because it's your story. It's my story. It's **our** story. We believe it's true because we know what it feels like to have life grab us by the ankles and dangle us over the waters of chaos. What's more we know that this happens in spite of our faith. We know it happens, at times, precisely **because** of our faith. Am I right?

For those that may not believe me, all you have to do is look at Jesus. What was the first thing that happened to Him **after** His baptism? The Spirit whisked Him away to be tempted by the devil. In the hole you go! I think that's why Matthew tells the story of Jesus' baptism the way he does, as an intimate encounter between himself and God. Not a spectacle for everyone to see and hear. I think Matthew tells it this way, because he wants us to know what it meant to **Jesus** before we try to figure out what it means for **us**. So what **did** it mean for Jesus? Well, it **didn't** mean that the Father would keep Him out of trouble. He found that out even before He had a chance to dry off! It didn't even mean that things would work out the way He'd planned. No, it seems to me, that what Jesus' baptism meant to Him, was this..that when he found himself in trouble He wouldn't find Himself **alone**. It meant that even when things didn't go His way He'd still have the Father's blessing and the Spirit's company.

And here's the thing, isn't that what Jesus' baptism means to **us**, too? Unlike John's baptism, Jesus' baptism means that we're not alone in the wilderness. It means that God's love for us doesn't depend upon us, that it's unconditional. It means that God's grace doesn't wash off, that it doesn't depend on our ability to earn it. The baptism of Jesus means that anytime we find ourselves in a hole, we can be sure to find Jesus there with us. It's been said that whenever the father of the Reformation, Martin Luther, found himself ready to give up, whenever worry for his own life and that of the Church he loved overwhelmed him he would touch his forehead and say to himself: "Remember Martin, you have been baptized." Here on the other side of Christmas, that's more than just good advice. That sounds like good news, darn good news. And so, as we cross this threshold between the divine and the mundane, the holidays and the "every" days, the ordinary days, the world we hope for and the world we live in, let us touch our foreheads and remember that **we've** been baptized. And on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, let us also remember that Jesus was baptized too. He was baptized **with** us. He was baptized **for** us. And may the comfort it gave him through all of his trials, give us even greater comfort through ours. Those baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and in the hole he goes.

Now what? Now let us pray...

Gracious God, thank You for this story on the other side of Christmas. Thank You for the Spirit's landing and Your blessing upon Jesus at His baptism. We thank You for the same in ours. Thank You also, for giving us Jesus, the baptized Savior. Help us to remember that we have been baptized. Help us to remember that Your grace doesn't wash off.

In Jesus' name.

Amen and amen.