

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
First Sunday after Epiphany – January 7, 2018 – Communion
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Mark 1:4-11

FOR REFLECTION

The use of water is customary with Baptism.

It is by it that we live and move and have our being.

This water reminds us of the underground River of Life
that is healing the divisions in our parched and broken world.

As human beings we are creatures of ritual and metaphor.

We are also creatures of the sense.

We see, we hear, we touch and something becomes real to us.

Baptism is a ritual for our senses, so that we can see, hear, and feel again the presence of
God's Spirit in and among us.

With this water, this gift, this cradle, this source of life,
we baptize those present today.

Water Bearers

I served four years as the Interfaith Coordinator (campus minister) at Occidental College at the turn of this century. One of the relationships I fostered was with an artist by the name of Perli Pelzig, an Israeli artist who designed and created the stained-glass windows of the chapel on campus. Because the campus was no longer just for Presbyterians and there was some amount of concern about the interfaith nature of the student body and faculty, I commissioned him to create a curtain of respect for the main window which was the most blatantly Christian.

I also arranged a year-long guest professorship on campus – during which he worked with the Jewish student group, Hillel, to create a sukkah for the fall harvest festival of Sukkot. He created some amount of controversy by designing the walls with images from the zodiac – based on mosaics found on the floors of some ancient synagogues. It was fascinating to watch this elderly imaginative artist come up against these young, traditionally minded Jewish students – creating fierce dialogue. It was wonderful.

Perli Pelzig @ Occidental College 1999
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MfpqkX_tjic

The relationship between art and ritual is as ancient as the first humans. Rituals were born from the desire to understand and manage our mortal experience of the inexplicable – be it divine or natural, cosmic or terrestrial. Rituals may become Traditions – but they began as works of art – performance art.

John the Baptist was a performance artist. It was believed that the prophet Elijah from the 9th century BCE would return to this earth as a sign of the End of the Age, “a harbinger of the Messiah and of the eschaton.” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elijah>
And John, cousin of Jesus, began to dress like Elijah – calling people to repentance and to repair their relationship with G-d. And he was announcing the arrival of Messiah.

Elijah, by the way, 9 centuries earlier, was concerned with the repentance of Israel’s leadership and their return to the one G-d – YHWH.

[King] built a temple for Baal, and his wife Jezebel brought a large entourage of priests and prophets of Baal and Asherah into the country... Baal was the Canaanite god responsible for rain, thunder, lightning, and dew...

Elijah warns Ahab that there will be years of catastrophic drought so severe that not even dew will form, because Ahab and his queen stand at the end of a line of kings of Israel who are said to have "done evil in the sight of the Lord."

No background for the person of Elijah is given except for his brief description as being a "Tishbite." [And] His name in Hebrew means "My God is YHWH."

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elijah>

YHWH, of course, is the one who provided water in the wilderness for Moses and the Israelites before their arrival in Canaan. How soon people forget the source of their blessings!

Here in the Gospel of Mark, we are told that John – dressed like Elijah – appears in the wilderness. The note in my text says that the “wilderness” in this text is not specifically located and can “symbolize Israel’s rebellion against G-d or its deliverance by G-d.”

[Harper Collins Study Bible NRSV](#)

And he is immersing people in water – a reminder that G-d is the source of life-giving water (no Baal or anyone else). And this immersion is called “Baptism” – in Greek “*baptizein*” – (which sounds German to me).

The Greek-English Lexicon of Liddell and Scott gives the primary meaning of the verb baptizein... as "dip, plunge" and gives examples of plunging a sword into a throat or an embryo and for drawing wine by dipping a cup in the bowl...

Two passages in the Gospels indicate that the verb baptizein did not always indicate submersion. The first is Luke 11:38, which tells how a Pharisee, at whose house Jesus ate, "was astonished to see that he did not first wash (... "was baptized") before dinner... meaning perform ablutions.

The other Gospel passage is Mk 7:3–4: "The Pharisees...do not eat unless they wash (ῥίπτω, the ordinary word for washing) their hands thoroughly, observing the tradition of the elders; and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they wash themselves (literally, "baptize themselves"...)"...People returning from market, would not be expected to immerse themselves ("baptize

themselves") totally in water but only to practise the partial immersion of dipping their hands in water or to pour water over them, as is the only form admitted by present Jewish custom...

[Scholars also believe this is] a verb used of the partial dipping of a morsel held in the hand into wine or of a finger into spilled blood.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baptism#Meaning_of_the_Greek_verb_baptizein

Keep this in mind as we practice the ritual of communion by intinction.

So, John, impersonating Elijah, is baptizing people – performing ceremonial ablutions – cleaning them up so they can meet their G-d and G-d's Anointed with a clear conscience and absolute certainty about whose they are. Past transgressions are repented of and put away, value systems are re-organized and claimed, people can start over in the new era under G-d's rule.

Which brings us back to the zodiac – an ancient story wheel based on the arrangement of the stars and their turning positions in the sky. Aquarius is the sign that appears for January 20-February 18. Of course, in search of astrological meaning, I turn to "café astrology to find the following. Aquarius, although an "air sign", is the Water Bearer...

...symbolically and eternally giving life and spiritual food to the world. The water from the vessel washes away the past, leaving room for a fresh, new start. The sign of Aquarius is forward-looking and growth-oriented. Concerned with equality and individual freedom, Aquarius seeks to dispense its knowledge, and its vision of equality and individuality, to all.

The glyph for Aquarius depicts the water from the water bearer's vessel, as a symbol of open-ended spiritual energy.

<https://cafeastrology.com/zodiacaquarius.html>

My other source of deep knowledge about the zodiac is Wikipedia which offers this: Aquarius is identified as ... "The Great One" in the Babylonian star catalogues and represents the god Ea himself, who is commonly depicted holding an overflowing vase.

... Aquarius was also associated with the destructive floods that the Babylonians regularly experienced, and thus was negatively connoted. In Ancient Egypt astronomy, Aquarius was associated with the annual flood of the Nile; the banks were said to flood when Aquarius put his jar into the river, beginning spring

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aquarius_\(constellation\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aquarius_(constellation))

Zeroing in on the human desire for meaning – and the power of story and metaphor in shaping culture – John, the water bearing messenger – and Jesus, the living water – corral the imaginations of their followers. Ancient gods – Ea and Baal – sky deities – forces of nature – all of these come to bear in the rituals these two perform – guiding people back to the true heart of the one G-d YHWH.

All of this was in the subtext of the musical HAIR that came out in 1967 – a performance art baptism – declaring the “Age of Aquarius” and the dawning of a new consciousness – a change in the ways we treat each other and our planet.

All of this comes to bear on us now – as we, like the ancient Babylonians, face floods of biblical proportions – and call upon our G-d to save us from natural destruction brought on by our own actions.

And in this new year, we are reminded by the stars to BE Water Bearers – to call our nation to repentance and renewal – to reestablish the value system upon which we believe our nation was founded – and bring new life, new power to the shaping of a compassionate and well-watered society.

May it be so – with G-d’s baptism and blessing.

Scripture Reading for Sunday January 7, 2018 – Christmas 2– Year B

Mark 1:4-11

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 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.

6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 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. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 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. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Aquarius
The Water Bearer

Modality: Fixed
Element: Air
Ruler: Uranus
Season: Winter
Charge: Positive
11th Sign of Zodiac

Metal: Uranium
Stone: Amethyst
Color: Sky Blue
Anatomy: Ankles, shins, circulation
Key Phrase: "I know"

Keywords: individualistic, assertive, independent, humanitarian, inventive, original, eccentric, opinionated, intellectual, idealistic, cool, friendly, detached

Aquarius Water Bearer Comparison with its symbol, the Water Bearer: The symbol for Aquarius is the Water Bearer, symbolically and eternally giving life and spiritual food to the world. The water from the vessel washes away the past, leaving room for a fresh, new start. The sign of Aquarius is forward-looking and growth-oriented. Concerned with equality and individual freedom, Aquarius seeks to dispense its knowledge, and its vision of equality and individuality, to all.

The glyph for Aquarius depicts the water from the water bearer's vessel, as a symbol of open-ended spiritual energy.

<https://cafeastrology.com/zodiacaquarius.html>

Aquarius Horoscope (January 20-February 18)

[https://4littlefergusons.wordpress.com/2012/05/15/the-tale-of-the-water-bearers-pots/Cracked Pot](https://4littlefergusons.wordpress.com/2012/05/15/the-tale-of-the-water-bearers-pots/Cracked-Pot)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baptism#Meaning_of_the_Greek_verb_baptizein
Meaning of the Greek verb baptizein[edit]

The Greek-English Lexicon of Liddell and Scott gives the primary meaning of the verb baptizein, from which the English verb "baptize" is derived, as "dip, plunge", and gives examples of plunging a sword into a throat or an embryo and for drawing wine by dipping a cup in the bowl; for New Testament usage it gives two meanings: "baptize", with which it associates the Septuagint mention of Naaman dipping himself in the Jordan River, and "perform ablutions", as in Luke 11:38.[64]

Although the Greek verb baptizein does not exclusively mean dip, plunge or immerse (it is used with literal and figurative meanings such as "sink", "disable", "overwhelm", "go under", "overborne", "draw from a bowl"),[64][65] lexical sources typically cite this as a meaning of the word in both the Septuagint[66][67][68] and the New Testament.[69]

"While it is true that the basic root meaning of the Greek words for baptize and baptism is immerse/immersion, it is not true that the words can simply be reduced to this meaning, as can be seen from Mark 10:38–39, Luke 12:50, Matthew 3:11//Luke 3:16, 1 Corinthians 10:2." [70]

Two passages in the Gospels indicate that the verb baptizein did not always indicate submersion. The first is Luke 11:38, which tells how a Pharisee, at whose house Jesus ate, "was astonished to see that he did not first wash (ἐβαπτίσθη, aorist passive of βαπτίζω—literally, "was baptized") before dinner". This is the passage that Liddell and Scott cites as an instance of the use of βαπτίζω to mean perform ablutions. Jesus' omission of this action is similar to that of his disciples: "Then came to Jesus scribes and Pharisees, which were of Jerusalem, saying, Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash (νίπτω) not their hands when they eat bread" (Mt 15:1–2). The other Gospel passage pointed to is: "The Pharisees...do not eat unless they wash (νίπτω, the ordinary word for washing) their hands thoroughly, observing the tradition of the elders; and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they wash themselves (literally, "baptize themselves"—βαπτίσωνται, passive or middle voice of βαπτίζω)" (Mk 7:3–4).

Scholars of various denominations [71][72][73] claim that these two passages show that invited guests, or people returning from market, would not be expected to immerse themselves ("baptize themselves") totally in water but only to practise the partial immersion of dipping their hands in water or to pour water over them, as is the only form admitted by present Jewish custom. [74] In the second of the two passages, it is actually the hands that are specifically identified as "washed" (Mark 7:3), not the entire person, for whom the verb used is baptizomai, literally "be baptized", "be immersed" (Mark 7:4), a fact obscured by English versions that use "wash" as a translation of both verbs. Zodhiates concludes that the washing of the hands was done by immersing them. [75] The Liddell–Scott–Jones Greek-English Lexicon (1996) cites the other passage (Luke 11:38) as an instance of the use of the verb baptizein to mean "perform ablutions", not "submerge". [76] References to the cleaning of vessels which use βαπτίζω also refer to immersion. [77]

As already mentioned, the lexicographical work of Zodhiates says that, in the second of these two cases, Mark 7:4, the verb baptizein indicates that, after coming from the market, the Pharisees washed their hands by immersing them in collected water. [75] Balz & Schneider understand the meaning of βαπτίζω, used in place of ῥαντίσωνται (sprinkle), to be the same as βάπτω, to dip or immerse, [78][79][80] a verb used of the partial dipping of a morsel held in the hand into wine or of a finger into spilled blood. [81]

A possible additional use of the verb baptizein to relate to ritual washing is suggested by Peter Leithart (2007) who suggests that Paul's phrase "Else what shall they do who are baptized for the dead?" [82] relates to Jewish ritual washing. [83] In Jewish Greek the verb baptizein "baptized" has a wider reference than just "baptism" and in Jewish context primarily applies to the masculine noun baptismos "ritual washing" [84] The verb baptizein occurs four times in the Septuagint in the context of ritual washing, baptismos; Judith cleansing herself from menstrual impurity, Naaman washing seven times to be cleansed from leprosy, etc. [85] Additionally, in the New Testament only, the verb baptizein can also relate to the neuter noun baptisma "baptism" which is a neologism unknown in the Septuagint and other pre-Christian Jewish texts. [86] This broadness in the meaning of baptizein is reflected in English Bibles rendering "wash", where Jewish ritual washing is meant: for example Mark 7:4 states that the Pharisees "except they wash (Greek "baptize"), they do not eat", [87] and "baptize" where baptisma, the new Christian rite, is intended.