



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Beloved Children of the Living God

SCRIPTURE:
Mark 1:9-11

January 9, 2022 – Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

The “babushka crunch.” That’s what we called started to call it. I was privileged to be part of a delegation of U.S. Presbyterians hosted by the Russian Orthodox Church. We were in St. Petersburg for a series of dialogues discussing the differences and similarities of our traditions. It was the first Presbyterian-Orthodox ecumenical dialogue. Our first Sunday there, we visited four different orthodox churches for worship. It was this Sunday, the baptism of the Lord Sunday, and during the service, the priests came and sprinkled holy water on the congregation.

Now, the orthodox churches have no pews. People stand for the whole service. In the first service, they had reserved spaces in the front for us. Behind, and to the side of us, were all these grandmothers, “babushka,” in Russian. Most of them seemed to be half my height. Most of them were very kind and gracious but a couple of them didn’t seem to like the fact that we were given space in the front. Sort of like a, “you’re standing in my spot” kind of thing. At the close of worship, the bishop came near us and dipped this evergreen branch in water and flung the water at us and that’s when I experienced it: The babushka crunch. All of these seemingly harmless grandmothers shoved their way forward carrying me with them, surging, with their hands up. They wanted the water. They were fighting for the water. They shoved some of our women and older men out of the way. Some of them were lifting infants and small children up so they could receive the water—shoving others around them.

At the third church, I was ready for them. As the priest came toward us, I braced myself but, by golly, these grandmothers were strong. They were built like tanks. They had this natural low center of gravity and two of them almost took me out. Several of them

lifted their grandchildren up so they could receive the water.

Later that day, I was sitting next to a priest and asked him about it. He smiled and said that one of his earliest memories was being lifted by his grandmother so he could get the water. I said to him, “So, the water is all about blessing.” He said, “Yes, it’s about blessing, but it’s also about *identity*.”

In the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—the four stories about the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus—there are only a handful of events, teachings and miracles that are included in all four. Jesus’ own birth is only mentioned in two of them. The Lord’s Supper is in three of them. Only two miracles are named in all four: the healing of the paralytic and the feeding of the 5,000. But *all* of them tell the story of Jesus’ baptism. This event, the baptism of Jesus, marks the beginning of his public ministry.

Mark, of course, is short, sweet and to the point. “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth to where John the baptizer was preaching and baptizing.” At first hearing, it sounds like Jesus was walking by the place where John was preaching and baptizing and he just got in line. But the passage says Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee. Scholars place John preaching and baptizing at a place named “Bethany beyond the Jordan.” That is almost 80 miles from Nazareth. It would have taken at least three days for Jesus to journey to John. He walked three days for a reason. He went to be baptized.

Baptism is partly about being cleansed. Many of the great religions engage in ritual cleansing as part of their practices. This is not new. Ritual cleansing has long been part of the Jewish tradition. It happens in Islam and Hinduism, Buddhism and Shintoism. All the great faiths have a ritual of cleansing. But look

what happens when Jesus is baptized. The scripture says: “as he was coming up out of the water” (by the way, that’s where our Baptist sisters and brothers and others get that baptism has to be by immersion because it says, “as Jesus was coming up out of the water”), Jesus saw the heavens “torn apart.” Get this: those two words, “torn apart,” appear one other place in Mark’s gospel. Some of you already know this. The words “torn apart” also describe what happened in the moment Jesus took his last breath—the moment he died on the cross. Mark says at that moment, the curtain in the temple was “torn apart” from top to bottom. Isn’t that powerful? In the moment of his baptism, Jesus looks up and sees the heavens torn apart. In the moment of his dying, the curtain of the Holy of Holies in the temple is torn apart. And Jesus sees the Holy 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.”

That’s what happens in baptism. We are cleansed. We are blessed. And we are given an identity. We are named as God’s children and we are claimed as God’s own forever.

Many of us are carrying a lot in these days. Some of that we take upon ourselves. Some of that is forced upon us. Here’s what the baptism of our Lord teaches us. That, in these waters, in these ordinary waters, we are named and claimed as God’s own forever. All those other things? All those other names and identities and burdens? They are secondary to the fact that we are beloved children of the living God. That is the identity that matters most. There will come a time in your life when that sure and certain knowledge is the only thing that will save you.

Several years ago, I was preaching a series of services for the Chapel by the Lake Presbyterian Church just outside of Juneau, Alaska. This is a beautiful church that sits by a lake that is filled by the magnificent Mendenhall glacier. The whole back wall of the chancel is glass and as you worship, you look out at the lake and the glacier. Sadly, though, I understand that much of the glacier has receded because of human-caused climate change.

Each time before I preached, I asked the pastors if they would invite a member of the congregation to share their testimony—to share how God had

been at work in their life. On Saturday night, Bill, an elder of the congregation got up. He owned a very successful engineering firm in Juneau. He was well known in the church and the community, well liked and greatly respected. He had a great family: wife, Annie, and three teenage kids. People smiled when he came to the pulpit and I had this sense that folks thought, “Well, of course, Bill will share.” Bill cleared his throat and said he needed to say something that he should have shared years ago. Then he told the congregation that the day before, he had just celebrated his eighth birthday and people looked a little confused. Then he said it was his eighth anniversary of being sober. He stood there and said, “I am a recovering alcoholic.” I remember there was an audible gasp in the congregation. He went on to say that he struggled for years with this addiction. He hid it well. But he knew that he was hurting himself and most of all, his wife, Ann, and his children.

Bill said several times he contemplated ending his life because he felt like such an imposter and such a failure. And it was only the grace of God that saved him. And the grace shown to him by his wife and kids. Then he looked at his beautiful wife and with tears streaming down his face, he said, “Annie, I am so sorry for what a terrible husband I have been to you. Thank you for sticking with me. Thank you for loving me.” Then he turned to his three teenage children and said, “Kids, for a lot of your early years, I was a terrible Dad. I have tried to make that up to you. Thank you for still loving me. No Dad could ask for better kids and I could not be prouder of you.” Then Bill looked out at us and said, “I know a lot of you think I have the perfect life. I don’t. I struggle every day. But that’s what makes God’s love so amazing to me. I am so grateful for all of you. Thank you.”

We are carrying a lot. Addiction. Grief. Anger. Depression. Disease. Self-doubt. Anxiety. Worry. They are real. But they do not form the most important part of our identity.

This is the most important part of your identity: You are the beloved child of the living God. And you say that over and over again until it is embedded in your soul. Who are you? I am a beloved child of living God. Who are you? I am a beloved child of the living God. Who are you? I am a beloved child of the

living God. That is who you are. It is who you have always been. It is who you are now. And it is who you will be forever and ever.

By the grace of God in Jesus Christ, we are named

and claimed as God's own forever. No wonder. No wonder the Babushka crunch.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.