

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And 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. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He 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. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

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

January 6th is the day that the Church celebrates the Epiphany. On Epiphany, we observe the story of when the Magi came to visit the boy Jesus. In that story the Magi are warned in a dream to avoid King Herod, who would abuse his power in order to squelch a threat to his throne. January 6th, 2021 was a day of Epiphany for our country, and for this world. The epiphany that, if we had not already realized it, our nation is broken. We are wounded and divided. Seeing the images of insurrectionists and vandals overtaking our Capitol... that symbol of our democracy... was shocking. However, it wasn't surprising. There were so many signs that something like this was coming.

I don't care to spend much of my breath this morning pointing to what transpired this past January 6th. Pastor Ginger and I wrote some thoughts about that day in the latest "Dear Saints," our article in the e-news sent to our mailing list each Friday. Refer to that for my initial thoughts on the events that unfolded. I hope all who were involved in or encouraged those events will bear the

consequences of their actions, but if I were to point only at them it wouldn't do us much good today. What I mean is that if all I did today was point at the people responsible for this insurrection, I would be leading us into the easy and familiar trap of letting ourselves off the hook from learning from these events.

Psychologists have studies on this; in a nutshell, psychologists tell us that when we witness someone do something morally reprehensible, like storm the Capitol, our brains quickly try to distance ourselves from that person. Something bad happens, and we try to say the perpetrators belong to X-group, but I belong to Y-group, which might be true, but I conveniently forget that X-Y-and-Z groups all kind of go together. This differentiation is automatic in us, the psychologists say. It's a coping mechanism. For example, years ago when they caught the BTK Killer, I first learned he was a Lutheran when someone said, "He is a Lutheran; aren't you a Lutheran?" I was shocked to learn that about the killer, and my immediate response was, "Yes, but he's from Kansas, and there are a lot of other kinds of Lutherans there." Truth be told, he was an ELCA Lutheran. That was not a shining moment for me, and I have confessed my sin of trying to toss that serial killer onto another group. What happened in that moment, though, was that my mind couldn't process that someone like me could be capable of such actions. So my mind quickly tried to differentiate the killer from myself. When our minds do that, it is a safety mechanism against the mental conflict at hand. Being an ELCA Lutheran is a large part of my identity, and a sizable portion of my ethics comes from that identity. So when I was informed that this serial killer also identified as Lutheran, my mind went into mental conflict. To resolve the conflict, my impulse was differentiation. It is a safety mechanism of our brain. However, we can't just leave things there, in that impulsive reaction. For starters, doing so doesn't face the truth. I could -- to this day -- adamantly argue that the BTK Killer was some other type of Lutheran. If I did that, though, I wouldn't learn or grow from the experience. I had to accept that it is possible for ELCA Lutherans to commit evil acts. That also meant learning that it is possible for anyone to commit evil acts. That learning sounds easy, but it takes our minds time to change thoughts and beliefs closely associated with our self-identity.

A macro-example of needing to move past the initial differentiation is a familiar story. Often when discussing Germany of the 1930s and 1940s, people will quickly label the Nazi movement as “the embodiment of evil.” The Nazi movement committed evil acts, for certain. But often we will use language that implies some sort of demon possession, as if it is impossible for fully-functioning humans to do such atrocities. We might not mean to do it, but labeling those people as evil, instead of the acts themselves, is one way for our minds to differentiate ourselves from them. “They were evil. I am not. Therefore I could never do what they did.” That’s basically what our minds conclude, as a safety mechanism. If we don’t move past that impulsive differentiation, then we prevent ourselves from even considering the possibility that we could be just as capable of doing acts of evil. That is very dangerous. Because if we only see others as capable of doing evil, then most of our actions are already justified. Those people who joined the Nazi movement were ordinary citizens living their lives, when they were swept up in the enthusiasm of their day. They didn’t just decide one day to “be evil,” they were caught up in a movement. It is scary to think that we are capable of being caught up in such things. But we need to look no further than the crowd’s enthusiasm for Jesus’ Jerusalem entrance on a Sunday and then that same crowd’s shouts for his crucifixion on Friday to realize how easy it is to whip people like us into a frenzy.

Of course none of us want to commit evil acts. So how are we supposed to prevent ourselves from falling into that trap? It honestly comes down to daily discipleship. When I say that, I’m not talking about the religious type of discipleship. I’m talking about the original meaning of the word: being a disciple is about being a pupil, or a student, of someone else. The idea was back in the day that if the pupil spent enough time being around and learning from the teacher, the teacher would be the mold for how the pupil’s life and values were shaped. A replica. Daily discipleship: the daily molding of who we are.

All that I’ve been discussing thus far comes down to us pondering this scenario for today: in any given week, if someone absorbs six days’ worth of media and internet messaging that says that certain other people have no redeemable qualities or even should be hated, but then that same someone spends one hour each weekend hearing a message to love their neighbor, which message is going to win out? Six days a week being led toward hate and distrust, versus one morning a week

being led toward love and compassion. Who is that person truly a disciple of? “You can only have one master,” Jesus said.

All of us are capable of being that person. Everyone of us should be critiquing the messaging that they are consuming. Not in the sense of any political leanings, but in the sense of “How is this messaging shaping my values and who I am?” As Christians, we must ask, “Is this messaging leading me astray from Christ’s message to forgive, to be merciful, to seek justice, and to love my neighbor?” Godparents and parents, your promises made at baptism is to do your best to make sure that child’s life is shaped by the love of God and not the hate of this world.

Fortunately, Jesus promises to always be the good shepherd, who protects and searches for the sheep. Today is the Baptism of Our Lord Sunday. It is the reminder that his baptism and our baptism eternally binds us together. In our baptism liturgy, we are asked three questions: *Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God?* <I renounce them.> *Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God?* <I renounce them.> *Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God?*<I renounce them.> We renounce those things, but can we **name** the forces that defy God in this world? We renounce those things, but can we **name** the powers of this world that rebel against God? We renounce those things, but can we **name** the ways of sin that draw us from God? We can start by naming hatred, white supremacy, misogyny, exploitation, abuse, homophobia, and transphobia as examples of forces and powers in this world that oppose God’s efforts to reveal to every human being that they are fully loved by a God who is willing to die for them. There are victims when people carry hate and fear in their hearts, and too often we fail to point out that the bearers of that hate and fear are the first victims of what they are carrying.

It has been a rattling week. Take some deep breaths. Drink your water. Know that God is with you. The world can be a scary place. Be diligent in knowing and naming the influences and powers that are seeking your devotion and your discipleship, leading you astray from God’s will. As Christians, doing so is part of our daily discipleship. And know that God is always with you, showing you mercy, forgiveness, justice, and love, so that you may embody those in this world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.