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“A New Way of Living”
Genesis 1: 1-5 & Mark 1:4-11
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Water is life! This, and this alone, is what was written in big bold letters on the board one morning as we entered our high school biology class. The lesson for the day was, as you may have guessed, on water. About how life as we know it would not exist were it not for water and about all the amazing things water does. And while the lesson was from a strictly scientific point of view, we see in our scripture today that “water is life” well beyond biology.

Let’s start at the very beginning. The *very* beginning. “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.” I love this image, “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” The “wind from God” is translated from a single Hebrew word, *ruach*, which not only means God’s spirit specifically, but also means wind and breath more generally. It is God’s Spirit, which gives us the breath of life. Ancient Hebrew understanding was that before God created the world, there was basically just water. God’s Spirit swept over the water and separated the water to make space for the land and indeed, the sky and the heavens were thought to be a big dome of water. So, limited though their scientific understanding may have been from our Twenty-first Century perspective, even they comprehended the importance of water and that there was a connection between water and life.

Fast forward a couple thousand years, give or take a few centuries, and we find John the Baptizer proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, baptizing people in the River Jordan and telling of one to come who would be greater than he saying, “I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” Enter Jesus. Jesus comes to John to be baptized but this is no ordinary baptism. (does Jesus do *anything* ordinary?) And just as he is coming up out of the water, he sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice comes from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ Again, we get the image of the river water parting as Jesus comes up out of the water and simultaneously the heavens being torn apart for the Holy Spirit to descend upon Jesus while the voice of God the Father speaks and for this rare, beautiful moment all three persons of the Holy Trinity are present: Father, Son and Holy Ghost, and for this rare, beautiful moment the boundaries between Heaven and Earth, God and humanity disappear. And we see that water is life. Baptismal water is spiritual life.

And that is what baptism is all about. In addition to being a symbol of God's pre-offered, preexisting grace and a symbol of our being grafted into the Body of Christ, in baptism when we go into the water, symbolically die to our old life, our old way of being to emerge from the water to be reborn to the new life, the life in Christ. Over the centuries the view of baptism has change, especially amongst the denominations. But in the Reformed tradition of which the Presbyterian church is part, we don't baptize to "save" someone. For instance, we don't believe that babies need to be baptized as quickly as possible to save them from hell. Rather, baptism is community event, an initiation formally welcoming the baptized into the family, into God's family. At Jesus' baptism, the voice from heaven pronounces, "you are my son, the Beloved; in you I am well pleased." As Jesus' brothers and sisters at baptism we, too, are welcomed into the Church Universal with the loving approval of a God who names us Beloved. In baptism, we given that blessed assurance of God's love and in that moment, broken and flawed as we may be, in that moment we have assurance that God is well pleased with us as well. The trick, is to continue living lives that reflect our status as beloved children of God. The trick, is to live lives pleasing to God.

In last year's Mission Yearbook, pastor Sarah Sarchet-Butter tells the story of eleven year-old Cameron coming to her to let her know of his desire to be baptized. I'm sure she was thrilled as any pastor would be. But the boy had a special request. He was shy about getting up in front of the whole congregation to receive the sacrament. He wanted to know, "Why can't I just be baptized down at the river by my cousin, like Jesus was?" Clearly, Cameron had been paying attention in Sunday school. Pastor Sarah saw this as an opportunity to teach Cameron about the theology of baptism. About it being a symbol of God's Grace and being incorporated into the covenant family of God. She told him how good it would feel to hear the entire church proclaiming their love and support of him. "Besides," she added, reaching for her Book of Order, "if you were baptized in the river by your cousin, how would the church recognize it?" "By my new way of living," he responded, his voice both tentative and confident. Clearly, Cameron *had* been paying attention in Sunday school. Sarah realized the teachable moment was for her, not for Cameron. She left the Book of Order on the shelf.

Each year on Baptism of the Lord Sunday, we remember our baptismal vows. In a way, it's similar to a renewal of marriage vows, a way of saying, "I'm still in. If I had it to do over, I would." It's not a "re-baptism." (Presbyterians believe that the first one sticks). It's simply an acknowledgement of the commitment made at our baptism, our commitment to follow in Christ's way. And it's reminder of God's Grace, God's love for us. It's a reminder of the love and support we have from one another, our church family, our brothers and sisters in Christ.

So what does this "new way of living" look like? The possibilities are endless. We find clues throughout scripture about our relationships with God and one another, about loving God with all our heart, mind and strength and our neighbors as ourselves. I Recently came across a blog post titled, "12 Things Happy People Do Differently."¹ The blogger, Jacob Sokol, summarized the work of positivity psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky (yes, there apparently is a science of happiness). In her book *The How of Happiness*, the author points to twelve habits of "happy" people. I'm a little wary of the word "happy." It's been used and re-used and mis-used so much it's lost a lot of it's

¹ <http://www.marcandangel.com/2011/08/30/12-things-happy-people-do-differently/>

power. We use “happy” for just about everything: happy new year, happy birthday, happy Halloween, happy Wednesday, happy garbage day, happy happy. Not to mention the potentially dangerous notion: If it makes you happy, it can’t be bad. Commercials tell us how to be happy. It usually involves buying something or taking a special pill. “The pursuit of happiness” is imbedded in the Declaration of Independence and hence in our DNA and yet, how many of us really are happy? The state of happiness is so nebulous and word “happiness,” if not the actual state of being happy, can be a weak and shallow word. And yet, I clicked on the link to find out. (After all, who doesn’t want to be happy?) So here’s the list (minus most of Jacob’s commentary, adding mine):

1. **Express gratitude.** – At the very least, we do this every Sunday in worship. Our prayers are full of thanksgiving. The sacrament of communion opens with the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving. We know that God has blessed us beyond measure. God’s Grace abounds and there is nothing we can do to earn God’s love or to lose it. But beyond our thanks in worship, are there opportunities we might be missing to express our gratitude to God and one another? Do we tend to focus more on the negatives than on the positives in our lives? As the blogger notes, “We’re gonna have a hard time ever being happy if we aren’t thankful for what we already have.”
2. **Cultivate optimism.** – Again, this is inherent in our faith: Christian hope. We are a Resurrection people. We believe in God’s power of life over death. That God yearns for the best for us. That however hard things may be now, no matter how difficult things may get, as Julian of Norwich said, “All will be well. All will be well. And all manner of thing will be well.” Hope is essential to our faith. But do we *really* believe it?
3. **Avoid over-thinking and social comparison.** – As Jacob notes, when we consider ourselves better than another person, it gives us an unhealthy sense of superiority, inflating our egos and “our inner Kanye West comes out.” Likewise, if we compare ourselves unfavorably to someone else, we are likely doing ourselves a disservice by not giving ourselves the credit we deserve. I think Jesus said this best, “Judge not lest ye be judged.” While in the context, Jesus was referring to judging others, it’s fair to say that this goes for ourselves, too. When we look down on anyone, including ourselves, we are looking down on a beloved child of God. Leave the judging to God.
4. **Practice acts of kindness.** – This speaks for itself.
5. **Nurture social relationships.** – Of course, one of the ways we nurture social relationships is right here in our church family.
6. **Develop strategies for coping.** – The suggestion is to have support network in place, have a plan for coping in place before tough times hit so you don’t have to make it up on the spot when, as the blogger notes, “It can be hard to come up with creative solutions in the moment when manure is making its way up toward the fan.” Again, God, our spirituality, our faith and our church family can, and should be, an important part of our coping strategy.
7. **Learn to forgive.** – This one, too, speaks for itself. But remember, trying to hurt another person by holding a grudge is like trying to hurt them by poisoning ourselves. It’s emotionally unhealthy, but it’s also impacts our physical health.

8. **Increase flow experiences.** – OK, I have to admit that this one is a little out there for me, so here's the blogger's explanation: "Flow is a state in which it feels like time stands still. It's when you're so focused on what you're doing that you become one with the task. Action and awareness are merged. You're not hungry, sleepy, or emotional. You're just completely engaged in the activity that you're doing. Nothing is distracting you or competing for your focus." Personally, I can think of times in my life, in worship or prayer, during yoga or running or listening to music or watching a play or movie that I think fit this definition.
9. **Savor life's joys.** – How many times do we read in scripture, "Rejoice!" In fact, I left these banners up for today. Though technically Christmas banners, white is the color for this day as white is the liturgical color for both sacraments: baptism and communion. And also, I figure the angels probably were rejoicing at Jesus' baptism just as at his birth. Though savoring life's joys probably doesn't require explanation, I do like what Jacob says, "Deep happiness cannot exist without slowing down to enjoy the joy. It's easy in a world of wild stimuli and omnipresent movement to forget to embrace life's enjoyable experiences. When we neglect to appreciate, we rob the moment of its magic. It's the simple things in life that can be the most rewarding if we remember to fully experience them."
10. **Commit to your goals.** – Commitment, of course, is extremely important in our faith. In baptism we are called to commit to God, to commit to one another, to commit to following Christ's way. Though "goal" implies a destination or an end and may not be entirely appropriate for our spiritual journey, even in the life of faith we can have goals. Possible goals of faith could be: praying more or reading the Bible more, inviting a friend to church, becoming more active in mission or another committee, or increasing your financial commitment to the church.
11. **Practice spirituality.** – Need I say more?
12. **Take care of your body.** – This is really number 12, I'm not making this up to try to get more people in my yoga classes. Remember, the body is the temple of God. It is a gift from God and like any gift, we should honor and care for it just as we would a family heirloom.

As I read this list, I was struck how this, for the most part secular list resulting from scientific studies, how Christian it is. Most, if not all, of the things on this list, the things that studies show can make us happy, are the things that make God happy. And perhaps, that is why they make us happy, *because* they make God happy. They lead not the shallow happiness sold on TV but to genuine happiness. They are not only tools for our pursuit of happiness, they are tools in becoming the people God calls us to be. We are God's beloved children, no matter what, but that precious, coveted second part of the statement, "in whom I am well pleased" that is not a given. That part requires some effort on our part. Indeed, this would not be a bad way to kick-off an effort at a "new way of living."