

*Pretty Spectacular – VIRTUAL EDITION*  
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Westminster Presbyterian Church, Ontario, CA  
January 10, 2021  
Year B - Baptism Of The Lord  
Mark 1:4-11

Happy New Year.

Or maybe this year we need to say “Happier New Year” or “Not As Tough New Year” or “Do Your Best To Be Okay With It Year.”

It was just about a year ago that the world was beginning to realize that COVID-19 was going to be a very serious problem. It wouldn’t be until mid-March that the virus would come to affect all of our lives in so many ways, even for those of us who weren’t going to catch it. A year ago, COVID-19 was looming like a very dark cloud on all of our horizons and getting darker all the time.

It’s an interesting exercise to go back and try to put myself in the frame of mind I was occupying then and see how my perspective has changed. With regard to the future of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in general and Westminster Presbyterian Church in particular, I was, as I have been for so many years now, trying to think long-term, trying to think about growth five, ten, fifteen years down the road. I guess I was living with the assumption that, in the short term, say the next three or four years, we were going to be okay.

But, in a very short period of time, I, along with hundreds of other pastors and lay leaders across the world, found my thinking was forced to go week to week, almost day to day. In those early and so very terrifying days of the pandemic, it wasn’t clear that this or any other church was going to survive in any form to 2021.

Of course, as we know now, with some fairly radical changes in how we worship and do

business, Westminster survived and continues to display about as much health and vigor as anyone could possibly expect under these very challenging circumstances.

We will survive. We will still be around at whatever point it is safe to gather together in worship again. I'm not losing any sleep over that anymore and haven't for quite a long time.

But, when we do return to live worship, we are going to find that all of the challenges we faced going into 2020 are still going to be there. We will still need to ponder how we shape our future in a culture that is increasingly unresponsive to traditional Presbyterian faith and worship. That discussion has been postponed but not cancelled.

As I've noted before, lots of people have lots of ideas about how this decline in appreciation for Presbyterianism began and who might be responsible. I think it's a very complicated question and I'm really not interested in assigning blame. I'm interested in discovering solutions.

I'm still working on the discovering solutions part, but today's Mark passage suggests to me that they we may often be leaving on the table opportunities to engage folks and get their attention long enough to realize that we have some pretty important and some pretty dramatic things to say. It's already true and it's only going to become more true in the future that faith needs to engage the imagination at least as much as it engages the intellect.

This is a pretty dramatic scene and it doesn't need much in the way of window dressing from me or any other pastor. John The Baptist is himself a very dramatic figure, not just in his appearance but in his rebellious attitudes toward the stick-in-the-mud Temple authorities in Jerusalem. John does what was then the very revolutionary act of performing mass baptisms in the River Jordan. So, right there, we've got some very dramatic images and scenes to talk about.

And then, into the midst of all that steps Jesus. Let's stop for a moment. Let's go past Mark's words, as eloquent as those words may be. In your mind, can you see all of this? Hundreds, maybe thousands, of Judean peasants are gathered on the banks of the Jordan. John The Baptist, in his camel's hair clothing and his leather belt, proclaims the coming of Jesus in what we can be sure was a loud, booming voice echoing off the canyon walls.

And then, Jesus appears. Not the baby Jesus of Christmas but the adult Jesus Who is about to embark on His career in ministry. Can you see the crowds parting like the Red Sea so that Jesus has a path to the Jordan? Can you visualize the baptism of Jesus, when He was fully immersed below the surface of the Jordan? Can you feel and hear Heaven tearing open? Can you see that beautiful dove? Can you hear the voice from Heaven affirming that Jesus is the Son?

The human imagination can see all these things in a way that the most vividly and creatively crafted computer graphics could not. And these are the kinds of images and the kinds of experiences that can engage the un-churched and put them on the long and winding road to faith.

We keep wringing our hands and worrying about all of these exterior factors. I think that the tools are right here in front of us. I'll be the first to confess that I'm not sure I've used them as effectively as possible but nobody's too old to learn.

Our faith and faith traditions are pretty spectacular. We will get the upper hand on COVID and we will be able to practice those traditions fully once again. And then we need to get to work on sharing them more widely with a culture desperately in need of greater faith.