

# **From the Pulpit of Trinitarian Congregational Church**

## **Sunday, January 11, 2015**

**Guest Preacher Rev. Ted Thornton:**

### **Pastoral Prayer:**

O God, you inspired your Prophet Jeremiah to say, "I know the plans I have for you...plans to prosper you..., plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." (29:11-13) Grant that you will inspire us, too, the congregation of the Trinitarian Congregational Church, to vote next Sunday with com-*passion*, understanding, and Christian love as we decide upon calling a new pastor. Give us kind and loving hearts through-out the week to come as we chart a new course for this church. Throughout this remaining week of unsettledness and uncertainty, help us to remember that you are God, and that you will be with us always no matter what, just as you were before this church was founded and as you will be forever to come. May we rest assured throughout the coming week that the process we undertook to search for our new pastor will bear fruit that reflects our labors. May we trust that all the good work that has gone into discerning our identity and our way forward will lead us to the outcome that pleases you and defines our mission going forward. O God, grant that all who confess your Name may be united in your truth, live together in your love, and reveal your glory in the world. Guide the people of this land, and of all the nations, in the ways of justice and peace; that we may honor one another and serve the common good. Turning to more personal and global concerns, Oh God, we pray that you will give us all a reverence for the earth as your own creation, that we may use its resources rightly in the service of others and to your honor and glory. Bless all whose lives are closely linked with ours, and grant that we may serve Christ in them, and love one another as he loves us. Comfort and heal all those who suffer in body, mind, or spirit; give them courage and hope in their troubles, and bring them the joy of your salvation. We commend to your mercy all who have died, especially those known and dear to us, that your will for them may be fulfilled; and we pray that we may share with all your saints in your eternal kingdom. O God, to whom our needs are known before we ask: Help us to ask only what accords with your will; and those good things which we dare not, or in our blindness cannot ask, grant us for the save of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

## **Sermon: TCC at the River Jordan**

**Text: Mark 1:4-11**

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

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

### **Sermon: TCC at the River Jordan**

A popular greeting card carries this sentence: "It may look like I'm doing nothing, but I'm actively waiting for my problems to go away." TCC, the waiting is over, and we have not been idling our time, twiddling our thumbs, waiting for our problems to go away! Welcome to TCC's Jordan River! We're on the banks of one of the most important river crossings in the life of this church. Whether our problems will go away or not is up to us, not to our incoming pastor, but I'm confident that the love we have practiced in our church family will continue to sustain us.

The Jordan is without doubt the most famous river in the Jewish and Christian worlds. Immortalized in the famous folk song as "chilly and wide" with "milk and honey on the other side," it's actually much more modest "in person" than in scripture. Barely a hundred feet at its widest and a good deal narrower than that in spots, it isn't "chilly and wide" nor is there literally "milk and honey" on the other side as the folk song depicts it. In fact, for most of its travels it resembles the little brook that flows just beneath our church property. You can practically jump across it, especially in those areas where John and Jesus are located in the passage we just heard: down near the place where it flows into the Dead Sea, down close to Jericho where the Israelites made their crossing.

Yet, the Jordan, thanks to the Old Testament, has kept its place in the hearts of Jews and Christians as a river of tremendous symbolic and spiritual power: for Jews and Christians it has meant the end of wandering and the beginning of something new and scarcely imagined: a new relationship with God. For the Israelites of Joshua's time, it meant the beginning of the political and religious conquest of the land God promised His people as they fled slavery in Egypt. The Bible tells us that after Moses looked out upon the Promised Land from the summit of Mount Nebo before he passed away,

it was Joshua who led the Israelites across the Jordan to enter and conquer that Promised Land.

I was blessed once to stand atop Mount Nebo in present day Jordan and survey the Promised Land for myself at 2,230 feet up, just as Moses was allowed to do before he passed away on its peak. The whole area was much more heavily forested back in Moses' day than now, but if you were an Israelite in those days, standing on top of that mountain with Moses, looking westward across a vast panorama toward the land you were convinced God had promised you, then you, too, would have been deeply moved and you, too, would have realized that your life was about to change forever. I've no doubt that the mix of hope and fear they felt is in our own hearts today.

There's plenty of archaeological evidence to support the thesis that a massive conquest took place in the 13th c. BCE, not at Jericho (that city wasn't even inhabited at the time – its walls came tumbling down a century or so before the Israelites even showed up), but practically everywhere else in Palestine. The lives of the people living in that land did, indeed, change forever.

Fast forward more than a millennium from those days to the lifetimes of John the Baptist and Jesus. For both John and Jesus, participation in any religious activity at the Jordan River would, in Rome, have been read as an act of rebellion, an act of tyranny against the Roman Empire. It would have been read as a statement, a stand against foreign rulers. By that time, the Jews of Palestine had endured a parade of foreign powers: Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Persians, and Greeks. The second crossing re-enacted by John and Jesus and sealed with Jesus' baptism most assuredly sealed the eventual fate of each of them because the signal it sent the Romans and to their puppet kings, the Herods, was the beginning of a new attempt by militant Jews to conquer the holy land and restore the purity of the holy promise they believed God had made to the Jewish people.

So, in a sense, Jesus' baptism encapsulates his whole story: beginning with his baptism, that politically seditious but spiritually essential act of rebellion, and leading John eventually to the headsman's block and Jesus to the cross. We should never forget: it was the Romans who were behind the beheading of John the Baptist, though their puppet king actually wielded the sword, and it was the Romans who nailed Jesus to the cross. Whether John and Jesus were militants at all, or just religious hermits who liked to hang out in the wilderness regions the Jordan River flowed through, is something we can never know for sure, but it's clear the Romans considered both of them rebels determined to wrest Palestine from the empire, and they did not suffer those they deemed rebels gladly.

Whatever else we say about Jesus' baptism, it was a good deal more than a political act: for Jesus, baptism was an exercise in self-identity: through John's baptism he became sealed as a child of God in the Holy Spirit, and emphatically not a child of any civil or worldly authority or power. For Jesus, as for ourselves baptism was an

act whereby he identified himself as a child of God (a radically personal relationship, unprecedented in a world where gods were gods of states, not individuals), a God who stands among many things for freedom, equality, and above all self-determination, and a God who in the end transcends the limitations of earthly existence: bricks and mortars, oil and electric bills, mowing the grass, plowing the parking lot outside, and all the rest, important as those things are. If you've been baptized, your primary allegiance is to God and to God alone.

Today the Trinitarian Congregational Church finds itself on the banks of its own Jordan River. Who or what is the TCC? Well, we've tried to answer that in the meetings and conversations we've had with each other for the past couple of years. It hasn't always been easy. Some feelings have been hurt; there may be even more hurt feelings to come. The River Jordan is both a shallow stream and a raging river, "chilly and wide."

Since Jesus has introduced us into a personal, loving relationship with God, I suggest we look at the many ways this church has practiced the love of Jesus, the true meaning of "Holy Spirit," in its fellowship. In classical Jewish and early Christian understanding, love was always what people do, not what they feel. A lot of people in this church do a lot of doing, day after day and week after week, much of it incognito, behind the scenes, sometimes without being recognized for all they do. Among other important things, as the anthem you just heard underscores, is the connection between our spiritual life and dining together as a congregation. Anyone who has partaken of a coffee hour out back, in front of a table groaning with goodies and treats, or a turkey dinner downstairs knows without my saying how blessed we are to have among us members who tirelessly labor to assemble the most wonderful treats and entire meals for the rest of us. Jesus never turned away from a good meal. One of my teachers used to say that what we do in our kitchens and our dining rooms is important for the operation of the universe. At the time, I thought that remark a bit extravagant; I don't now. Our communion Sundays remind us of the joys of sharing food together; but it's our day in and day out practice of this very holy and spiritual as well as appetizing activity that goes so far in cementing our bonds of love and friendship with one another.

Another area we practice love intensely in this church is through our music program. St. Augustine said, "Qui cantat bis orat" – "Whoever sings prays twice." If you want this church to prosper as a place of worship, a place where we glorify God, don't be afraid to sing out during hymns. Make your favorite hymns known to the Music Committee. And, if you're really inspired, join our choir. We have a lot of fun. And, we have great parties at the beginning and end of each season. Talent doesn't matter; what matters is good will and the will to learn. We can use you. A good music program inspires and brings out the best in everyone, especially the pastor who, after all, is human and just as responsive to good music as any of the rest of

us. A pastor cannot do his or her best if the church doesn't have a good music program.

We in this church will have plenty to do as a Christian community under the leadership of our new pastor. Don't be mistaken that our identity as a church is the pastor's responsibility alone. It will be the pastor's call to light the way but it will be our job to make our way and to make it work.

Baptism was identity formation for Jesus. For the Trinitarian Congregational Church it is likewise a time for forging a new identity as a church. With the arrival of our new pastor, the church begins a new phase and a new identity in its life. What or who will TCC become? How we answer that question is crucial, and the path ahead for us won't always be easy.

The life of the Spirit, living in and with the Spirit, is not for sissies. Keep in mind that the very next line of scripture in Mark is: "The Spirit immediately drove him [Jesus] out into the wilderness." Jesus hadn't even a minute to savor or enjoy the new presence of the Holy Spirit in his life before facing Satan and being "tempted." Actually, I like the literal Greek word "tested" (πειραζόμενος) rather than "tempted." Testing best describes what we will be going through.

Perhaps herein lies an important lesson for us. If we expect the spiritual dove that descended upon Jesus to bring peace and bliss into our lives, maybe we don't understand what the Holy Spirit really is. Patter and I are continually amused watching how real doves interact with other birds on our feeders: there's nothing peaceful or blissful about their behavior at all; they bully and drive the other birds away. They're hands down the most aggressive birds that come to us. To my mind, the dove has always been a very curious symbol for peace..

Like Jesus, we will be tested in the weeks, months, and years to come. It's delusionary to imagine that a life of "blissed out" rapture is possible. As world religions scholar Huston Smith likes to say, a life in the spirit includes times when we're going to catch the "spiritual flu." There will be times when life in the spirit doesn't feel very good, times when our courage and our resilience will be tested. In such times it's important for us to remember that a portion of the gift of the Holy Spirit is trust that God will not forsake us in such times even if it feels otherwise. A story is told of a new and very green minister who was giving a children's sermon one Sunday. He told the children about sheep, that they weren't smart and needed lots of guidance, and that a shepherd's job was to stay close to the sheep, protect them from wild animals and keep them from wandering off and doing dumb things that would get them hurt or killed. He pointed to the little children in the room and said that they were the sheep and needed lots of guidance. Then the minister put his hands out to the side, palms up in a dramatic gesture, and with raised eyebrows said to the children, "If you are the sheep then who is the shepherd?" He was pretty obviously indicating himself. A silence of a few seconds followed. Then a young voice piped up, "Jesus, Jesus is the shepherd." The young minister, obviously caught by surprise,

said to the boy, "Well, then, who am I?" The little boy frowned thoughtfully and then said with a shrug, "I guess you must be a sheep dog." Well, we're not going to settle for a sheep dog at TCC – we all know that. Let's pray that the Holy Spirit may descend anew upon us as it did upon Jesus at that critical moment when he climbed out of the waters of the Jordan River to begin his own new life of ministry. And, let's not be surprised if the Spirit leads us through a wilderness or two after that. Jesus left behind his carpenter's tools and picked up a very different set of tools. What tools will we pick up as we move forward in our life in this church? We will all be looking to our new pastor for help with these questions. But it won't be all up to our pastor. We ourselves are called upon once again to ask who are we and whither will we go?

More than anything, though, the Israelites at the banks of the Jordan, and Jesus coming out of those same waters with the dove of the Spirit descending upon him are expressions of hope: hope that the future is in the hands of a God who loves us and, as the voice from the clouds called out that day, is "well pleased" with us."