

## DEFINING MOMENTS

Mark 1:4-11

(One person sitting in a rocking chair and reminiscing about the history of the church and its glory days. This person could be looking at pictures or history books. The other person is John the Baptist speaking about the urgency of the future of the church and our faith.)

Rocking Chair Person (Alice Judkins): Oh, I love this church so much! It is so good to celebrate 200 years. Look at all these pictures of the people who grew up in this church! Their faith was nurtured right here. So many people have been served through the life and ministry of First Presbyterian on the corner of Main and Liberty.

John the Baptist (Dave Van Scoy): I am John the Baptist and am here to tell you, repent, repent for the time has come! The Holy Spirit is coming among you and you need to embrace it. This is no time to sit in rocking chairs, tell stories and look at pictures.

Alice: We have been working hard for 200 years in this mission that God has given to us. We deserve a little time for celebration. We need to look back and be grateful for all who have gone before us and for all that we have been blessed with. The past defines very much who we are today.

John the Baptist: There are so many people in your community who have not heard the message of God's love. It is time that you reach out to them. You can't just sit here, action is needed. So many people are in need of care in your world. So many leaders in your world don't care about justice for the poor, what are you going to do about it? And don't give me the bit I get in many churches: "we are too small and insignificant." God has always used the small and insignificant to bring big changes.

Alice: I don't know why you have to be so harsh. Part of serving God is also affirming God's people and celebrating God's presence among us. This church has a great legacy of amazing people of faith who have helped spread the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ and who have made an incredible difference in the community. In fact, many of the people here in this congregation wouldn't even know about you if they didn't hear the Bible preached and taught by those before us.

John the Baptist: I see the urgency of the Spirit and how it is moving the church into the future. I think the work of the Spirit right now is so urgent and demanding that you can't afford to sit in that lovely chair of yours!

Roula: It is hard to put these two passions together without tension. This is our year to mark 200 years of ministry. So, how do we celebrate? Do we just look at the past and live in it or do we forget about the past and focus our energy on the future? Which one do you find yourself identifying with more, the rocking chair or the fiery visionary? I am sure that we have both sides present here in this church. There are those of us who want things the way they have always been because of the importance of our heritage and there are those of us who are always looking ahead to the future and want things to be new and different. I personally think the tension between these two does not need to exist. What I believe we need is to focus our energy on the defining moments in our life together because these are the times that define all other times. But what makes those moments so important? Some might say when big and

important things happened such as the groundbreaking for a new building or the arrival of a new pastor, or the special anniversary of 200 years.

In order to get a deeper understanding of what makes some moments more defining than others, it is appropriate for us to consider a defining moment in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Today is Baptism of the Lord Sunday when we remember and celebrate the story of the baptism of Jesus Christ in the river Jordan by his cousin John the Baptist. In the Gospel of Mark this is truly the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. The beginning is not a birth story with shepherds or magi. The beginning of the story in Mark is Jesus' baptism. This is the defining moment of his ministry. To make this point clear the Gospel writer records that there was a schism, a parting, or a rending of the heavens at this defining moment. The Greek word for this in verse 10 is *schizo* indicating not just an opening in the heavens but a major event. This is how Mark opens his Gospel and how he ends it. First Jesus begins his ministry with a *schizo*/schism in the heaven and then he ends his ministry with a *schizo*/schism of the veil in the temple (chapter 15:38). These were certainly two significant moments in the life of Jesus Christ marking the beginning and the end. But what really made those moments important was the presence of the Holy Spirit. As he is being baptized by John the Baptist, Jesus has a mystical experience by which the lively and guiding manifestation of God's Holy Spirit takes birth in him in an "enhanced" way. Mark is unclear as to the public nature of revelation. Did God's voice boom like thunder and everyone heard it, or did Jesus alone hear the words of affirmation, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased"? At his baptism, Jesus experienced what the Celts describe as a "thin place," in which God is utterly transparent and active in his life. This was indeed a defining moment in the life of Jesus but it was not because he was given an assignment, a call, an important job or a task. It was not because he was appointed the CEO of salvation in the world. It was because he experienced the fullness of God's presence in his own being. It was because of his identity in relationship to God, "You are my beloved." From that moment on, all of his ministry and work emerged out of that identity and not out of some strategic plan for salvation.

These are the moments that define our whole being. These are the moments when we know deeply who we are and then as a result all of life makes sense and we don't need grand schemes anymore because we simply know! But this is hard for us to come by. It is even hard for us to notice some of these defining moments in our lives and in the life of our church.

This is especially hard in our time in history when it is even harder than ever to discern much of anything. We live in a time of quantum change. Change as we know it has changed. Our world is changing so fast and beliefs are changing in our society that it is hard to assume anything. For example, the worldview of God as the guy up there who controls what happens down here on earth is no longer acceptable by all people. The comedian George Carlin said that if God is the big cosmic vending machine, where we put in our faith and get what we want, the machine is out of order. Another example is our old assumption of ultimate or objective truth. In the modern world (Enlightenment to the 1980s), there was a common assumption that there was some universal truth to be claimed and defined, but in our postmodern world, we see that there are multiple truths and that any human truth is always subjective. Things don't fit so neatly anymore.

We are facing a time that is not so different from the time of our ancestors who established this church 200 years ago. Just like us, they were entering the unknowns of a new world. They were creating their own culture. They had left the old country behind and tried to open themselves to a new experience of life. So in this time of great change we, like them, cannot look to the

securities and models of the past or just put our hopes into our strategic plans for the future. What we are invited to is to discover once more who we are as the people of God who are born of the Spirit of God. Mark's account of Jesus' baptism is an invitation for us to reflect upon our own experiences of revelation. We are invited to pay attention to those moments and practices that awaken us to the holiness of the world and the blessedness of our lives. God's covenant with creation is universal, but expressed to us one moment at a time. Baptism, like creation, is not a once for all event, but an invitation to constant growth and awareness.

This awareness does not always come to us from our great moments only when we are successful, strong or accomplished. In fact, the most important and defining moments in my life were at times of great pain or despair when I was truly open to the Spirit of God.

The story is told about a pastor who was at a downtown city mission. In order for the homeless people to sleep at this mission, they had to endure a worship service and a sermon. It was part of the bargain in order to get food and shelter. The preacher that night felt he was a gifted orator and had memorized Kipling's poem, "If" for a high school thespian contest. The pastor recited the poem with great gusto. "If you men can keep your heads when all about you, are losing theirs and blaming it on you. ... If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you, and make allowances for their doubting too. ... If you men can wait and not be tired of waiting. ... Or being lied about, not deal in lies.... Or being hated and not give way to hating. Yet don't look too good nor talk too wise. ... If you men can dream and not make dreams your master.... If you can think but not make thoughts your aim. ... If you can meet with triumph and disaster, and meet those two imposters just the same. ... If you men can fulfill the unforgiving minute, with sixty seconds left of distant run. ... Yours is the earth and everything in it. And what is more, you will be a man, my son." As the pastor recited this poem, the "thespian" in him choked with emotion. He was on the edge of tears and filled with deep feelings. There was a long silent pause. During that pause and silence, a voice from the back of the room piped up, "What if you can't?" The question persists, "What if you can't?" What if you can't master your dreams? What if you can't meet triumph and disaster just the same? What if you lose your head when everybody else around you is keeping theirs? What if you can't trust yourself? What if you can't wait? What if you are tired of waiting? What if you are a lousy parent? What if you are a failure in marriage? What then? Sometimes our defining moments are our failures and sufferings and how we can claim in the midst of adversity that we are children of God. Sometimes our brokenness is the place when we are most open to receive the gift of God's presence.

I hope that this year and in the years to come we will be able to pay attention to those defining moments of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in the life of our church. Only then we can truly celebrate 200 years of being the church of Jesus Christ on the corner of Main and Liberty. Amen.