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**Title:** Blessed and Beloved

**Preacher:** Katie Kerr, Minister to Children and Families

**Text:** [Mark 1:4-11](#)

**E-Mail:** [Katie Kerr](#)

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A mere 16 days ago we celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ! Last Sunday we experienced Epiphany with the three magi bestowing gifts upon the Christ child. And today we jump forward some 30 years to find Jesus along the Jordan River. He was preparing to begin his ministry. He was getting ready to start

a new journey much like we are at the beginning of this new year. I know that 2020 was a year like no other and things are still not quite the same, so how do we move forward? I keep hearing from “experts” on tv that we need to take it easy on ourselves. We have been through and continue to experience a lot! And yet I can’t help but feel the urge to lunge forward and at the same time weary to do so. I have struggled to make plans or set goals. So today, let us embark on this journey together.

To move forward, let us first take a look back not in 2020 but the baptism of Jesus and in doing so our baptism. We will look to the Gospel of Mark which was written by a Christian scribe name John Mark who worked closely with Paul and Peter. Mark sets up his Gospel in three parts with the hope of influencing the reader by showing you Jesus and people’s reaction to Jesus. The first half talks about who is Jesus, the middle turns to the disciples and asks them who they say he is and the second half of the gospel concludes with how Jesus will become the Messiah. The ongoing theme throughout Mark is how everyone around Jesus is constantly questioning how He is or will become the Messiah they have waited so long for.

Our story begins with John the Baptist, who is in Galilee at the Jordan River baptizing people and spreading the news of another who is still to come. He is preparing the way for Jesus as it was foretold by the prophets in the Old Testament. Let us look at Mark chapter 1 verses 4-11.

*John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 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. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 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. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." 9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 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. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

John baptizing followers creates a holy ritual. One in which Jesus felt the need to participate. Perhaps He was longing for the Holy Spirit and acceptance and blessing from his heavenly father. And upon rising from the water the heavens were ripped open and God spoke words affirming Jesus as his beloved son. It is this holy ritual that we continue to this day and provides us a connection between our baptism and Jesus' baptism. It is this holy ritual that reminds us that we don't have to *do* anything to receive God's blessing. We are passive recipients of God's promises. God chooses us. I love this definition of grace; *the love and mercy are given to us by God because God desires us to have them.* Haven't we longed for those words of acceptance, identity, blessing, and love? And God gives them to us freely because we are enough. We are blessed and beloved.

It is important to remember that God's grace is given to both the baptized and unbaptized, whether you make the decision for yourself or were baptized as an infant. It is, however, a wonderful reminder of the spiritual journey that we will embark upon. As we welcome a new year, this is a perfect time to reflect upon your baptism. Or if you are one of the youth who made their professions of faith a few weeks ago, your upcoming baptism. It is a meaningful event in your life. One that reminds us of God's grace. As you think about what is yet to come this year, the decisions you will make, the ups and downs you will encounter, the relationships built and lost, jobs that will change, learning that will take place, and change that will ultimately happen. It's daunting. Until we remember that we do not walk this journey alone. God is always with us and for us. We need only to take the first step.

I was reading a book by Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Alter in the World*, and she was talking about *the practice of walking on the earth* and within this chapter was a story about labyrinths. Now if you are like me, I know very little about labyrinths and in fact, have never experienced one myself. A labyrinth is a type of maze, it is laid out in a perfect circle with a curling path inside. The labyrinth typically does not have walls but entrusts that the one who enters will follow the path which includes many detours and switchbacks to reach the center.



The purpose of a labyrinth is an ancient spiritual practice where truth is borne out. Barbara talked about how her interest in attempting a labyrinth uninterrupted by others and hope for a perfect experience had kept her from doing it for many years. Finally, she met a woman who had a labyrinth on her land in a small grove of pine trees. The woman told Barbara that she was more than welcome to visit anytime she would like and need not call beforehand. So, Barbara returned to the labyrinth one summer afternoon determined to make her walk. As she entered the labyrinth, her mind was filled with questions. Why should I follow this set path? Why couldn't there be more than one way? Why couldn't I just step over the stones and go directly to the center? Who has time for all these switchbacks? Upon arriving at the center, she noticed the view was essentially the same from the center as it was at the entrance.

She thought about simply stepping over the stones and calling it a day but being a rule-follower, she instead turned to follow the path. This time she wasn't concerned about getting anywhere since she had already reached the center. So, she breathed more deeply noticing the soft pine needles beneath her feet. She noticed the small mementos along the path left there by others. When she arrived back at the entrance, she paused to realize that surely God was in this place. She said something that stuck out to me, "The beauty of physical practices like this one is that you do not have to know what you are doing in order to begin. You just begin, and the doing teaches you what you need to know."

A labyrinth may provide a set path, but by no means does it provide a set experience. The same can be said about one's spiritual journey. We all desire to follow the path of Christ, however, everyone's experience along that journey is different. So often we feel like we need to take the easiest route, the fastest route instead of taking a moment to see the world around us. Jesus walked everywhere and in doing so was able to see those around

him more clearly. He wasn't rushing from town to town. No, he took time to teach, heal, walk, and listen.

We have to allow ourselves the opportunity to step onto that path with an open mind knowing that we are not walking the path alone. We begin knowing that we are blessed and beloved not because of who we are, but because of *whose* we are.