

must ponder, again and again, whether we are turning to face the light or whether we are turning toward the shadows.

Recently, right here in our own city, Presbyterians navigated between the authorities of government and the authority of our faith. Starr Presbyterian Church had been housing South Oakland Citizens for the Homeless for a number of years, including an overnight shelter and other services through the Welcome Inn. This is where we donated several dinners in December. As the Starr congregation started to plan its closure as a church, the members, in partnership with the Presbytery of Detroit, began to consider how their building could leave a legacy of their faith. They wanted the homeless shelter to stay at the corner of 13 Mile and Crooks Road, even though no congregation would be worshipping there anymore. So the church, along with people in our Presbytery, including FPCRO member Keith Weber, navigated many legal processes and all types of authorities to work out a plan that was faithful and benefited all the parties. There were some sticky issues and thorny matters to figure out. They were sometimes pitted against authorities both in the church and in the city government. But they were determined to live into the baptismal values Jesus proclaimed: a world where the poor and needy are fed, where people share what they have so everyone has enough. The outcome has been a wonderful celebration! The Welcome Inn will be able to stay at the Starr property through a very low-cost lease. This finally allows South Oakland Citizen for the Homeless to access to state and federal grants that will help them improve services. And the Presbytery, of which we are a part, continues to serve through a historic church building that will now support the community in a whole new way. The people involved sought to follow the baptized life even as they sorted through challenging authorities to serve the common good.

When we are baptized, the Holy Spirit claims us and names us as God's own. And then the Spirit sends us out to walk the way of faith, turning toward Christ's light and away from the shadow of evil. Embracing our baptism will sometimes mean we are set against the expectations of all kinds of authorities. We are called to navigate our way through those challenges, holding firm to our faith in Christ and our identity as God's own. As we do that, we may see the salvation of God unfolding before us.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

January 12, 2025
Baptism of the Lord
"The Baptismal Life"
Rev. Emma Nickel
Scripture: Luke 3:1-22

About a year ago, I started to follow the news about a church called Dad's Place in Bryan, Ohio, a town of about 8,600 people west of Toledo. The church was inviting unhoused people to temporarily stay in the main room of its building. The town has a housing shortage, as so many places do, and the church was providing needed warmth from the cold for about 15 people each night. City officials said they started getting calls about disturbance from the building, though. They indicated that the building was not up to the proper codes for allowing people to live there, and zoning laws prohibited it from serving as a residence. The church refused to turn the people out. So their pastor then faced 18 zoning code violations punishable by fines, up to six months in prison, or both. In turn, the church filed a federal lawsuit which argued that offering food and shelter to people in need is a religious activity that should be protected under the law.

When I first saw the story, it caught my eye because a pastor was facing potential jail time for church activities. Always something to keep my eye on, I suppose! The lawyer representing the church made statements that sounded reasonable. He said, "Churches have throughout history in this country and in others... taken in anybody who walks through their doors. Churches simply have the right to care for them." The church cited their commitment to serving the least of these based on the words of Jesus in Matthew 25, a passage that guides our church's ministries, as well. But as I read more, I also knew that a church, like any other organization, is bound by the laws of its city. We face that all that time here, with routine fire inspections and the occasional citation from the city when they don't like the placement of our lawn and leaf bags, or some such issue. Then I realized that the firm who'd filed suit on behalf of the Dad's Place church was a religious liberty organization. Many of those paint a picture—I would say a false one—that churches in our country are under siege. But I kept following their story because, fundamentally, I still share their sense that faith in Christ compels us to care for those most in need. Even, and maybe especially, when that commitment puts us at odds with those in authority.

The story of Jesus' baptism reveals that the ministry of Christ, and the faith he taught, is often at odds with unjust authority. I told you to try to pay attention to all those names at the beginning of the passage. I know they're confusing. Luke included those specific historical references to situate Jesus at a particular point in time. But all those rulers also represent something else. They paint a "deadly shadow" over the time and place where John baptized Jesus.

Tiberius was a military genius who served the Roman empire well, but not the many people he killed or sold into slavery. He gained a reputation for killing anyone who challenged him, or terribly abusing them. Pilate was a middle-manager serving in this vicious realm and Antipas would soon execute John the Baptist, proving his retributive ways. This long list of rulers represented the violence, domination, and the shadow of death that hovered over the lives of people in the ancient Roman world.

Into *that* world, and in face of those authorities, John came proclaiming that salvation was on the way. He preached—like Isaiah before him—that all people were going to see and receive the salvation of God. He told them to prepare for Jesus, who was coming soon.

Jesus represented something completely different than the authorities of Tiberius and Pilate and Antipas. Jesus was inaugurating a world that brings new life. Jesus' kingdom is illuminated by light and compassion. No more shadows of death. The world Jesus ushered in is marked by the just and kind actions John described: sharing what you have, treating others fairly, being content with your life rather than stealing to get what isn't yours. Jesus' kingdom gathers people in with love. And often, it turns out, that kind of beautiful, joyful kingdom is in serious conflict with any authority who stands for power, might, or vengeance. The way toward the kingdom Jesus stands for begins with baptism. First Jesus', and then ours.

Baptism was the initiation into Jesus's world and God's way of life. We tend to romanticize baptism a bit. Since our church baptizes babies more often than youth and adults, the sacrament for us is particularly sweet and precious. In the water, we focus on God's unconditional love and God's claiming of us into the wider family of the church. Yet John was preaching something in addition to that good news. He also called for people to change their lives. To turn a new way: to turn toward God. To realize that how they lived mattered just as much as who they were. All these things are still true for what baptism means to Presbyterians. God's love is unconditional. And our grateful response in baptism is to live our lives accordingly. By turning away from the things that hurt and cause brokenness, and turning toward love, justice, and faithfulness. When we do that, we sometimes end up doing things that conflict with what people expect of us. Even things that are opposed to the demands of our families, our friends, or those in authority.

The things Jesus did often pitted him against the religious authorities and the government. His promises of blessing for the poor and freedom for the oppressed got him into hot water with everyone. He spoke against the authorities of his time, though he was careful with his speech and actions in order to prove his point. Yet he did so with confidence and clarity of purpose. All because of his baptism. When he came up out of the waters and was praying, then the heavens were opened and the voice of God spoke. Jesus was reminded who he was and whose he was: God's beloved. That truth helped him cling to his calling and cling to God throughout the coming years of ministry. That truth allowed him to persevere in faith and love, even when he came into conflict with the injustice of those who had authority over him.

Baptism invites us into that kind of life, too. Baptism reminds us who we are—beloved children of God. And it reminds us what we are called to be about: loving God and serving one another, even when it costs us something; even when those in power do not support the kind of kingdom Jesus proclaims. The baptismal life is shaped like the cross, even as it also points toward new life and glory.

On a small scale, maybe this baptismal life looks like standing beside someone in your family whom others have rejected. Whether due to a mental health condition or poor life choices or their identity. And sticking with them to offer love and accountability, because your faith demands it. Because you know that God does not give up on anyone. Even though that may put you in conflict with a parent or a relative or someone else you love.

On a larger scale, maybe the baptismal life means being the thorn in the side of your city. Being tireless in efforts to get them to do the right thing to support zoning for a hospice house or a low-income childcare center; or to require more affordable housing each time they approve new, high-end lofts. Even when people tear your efforts apart on social media or talk badly about you behind your back. Because Jesus was clear that the poor shall be lifted up and the powerful brought low.

In the face of injustice or brokenness, we may have to butt up against authorities of all kinds to live out our faith. Because that is what it looks like to turn away from the shadow of death and toward the joy of Christ's new world. Was the congregation in Ohio doing that by housing people in their church building? Did it matter that they were breaking some laws? Or did it only matter that they were extending mercy to those in need? Should we, like their pastor, be willing to put our freedom on the line in order to serve the least of these? I'm not sure there is a single answer to questions like those. But baptized people need to be willing to ask those questions. Baptized people are called to consider whose authority matters most in our lives. Baptized people