

**Prelude:** **[Annie Schulz]**

**Gathering thoughts:** **[Beth Woelk]**

Welcome to worship with Grace Mennonite Church for Sunday, January 10<sup>th</sup>. Once again, we wish you a Happy New Year. Oh how we'd love to greet one another and gather in person! We acknowledge that this provincial lockdown can feel difficult, isolating and lonely at times. Yet we continue to commit ourselves to following best practices and guidelines and to staying home to keep one another and ourselves safe. What a gift that we can connect this way through these printed and recorded services and we are thankful for all those who make this possible. Once again, Ted Kopp is at the soundboard, Annie Schulz and the Grace Singers have prepared beautiful song selections, and Kevin McCabe and Doug Schulz will bring us a creative reflection on today's gospel lectionary passage. We have entered the season of Epiphany - this liturgical time celebrating the manifestation of God With Us in our present reality - and we at Grace have begun a worship series entitled "Awake! Arise! God is Calling Now."

**Call to Worship:** **[Beth Woelk]**

We come to worship and celebrate the Mystery and Reality of God With Us now, in the midst, within and all around.  
May this time together encourage, challenge, and inspire us,  
that we might open our hearts and hands to receive God's goodness,  
that we might open our hearts and hands to share what we receive.

**Prayer:**

Creator God,  
Your Spirit Wind swept over the waters of creation and  
You are sweeping over us now, creating something new.

Awaken us to Your presence.  
Renew our spiritual strength,  
refresh our hope-filled vision,  
and deepen our abiding trust.

Guide our steps as we arise to follow You.  
Call us forth to experience what You are doing now;  
in us, and through us, and in our world.

We awake, we arise, and we hear You calling us now!

**Scripture:**                      **Genesis 1: 1-5**                      **[Beth Woelk]**

**1** In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, **2** the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. **3** Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. **4** And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. **5** God called the light Day, and the darkness Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

**Grace Singers:**                      **"Of the Father's Love Begotten"**

*Of the Father's love begotten, ere the worlds began to be,  
he is Alpha and Omega, he the Source, the Ending he,  
of the things that are and have been, and that future years shall see,  
evermore and evermore!*

*By his word was all created. He commanded and twas done.  
Earth and sky and boundless ocean, universe of Three in One.  
All that sees the moon's soft radiance, all that breathes beneath the sun,  
evermore and evermore!*

*This is he whom seers in old time, chanted of with one accord,  
whom the voices of the prophets promised in their faithful word.  
Now he shines, the long expected. Let creation praise it's Lord,  
evermore and evermore!*

*O ye heights of heav'n adore him, angel hosts his praises sing.  
Pow'rs, dominions, fall before him, and extol our God and King.  
Let no tongue on earth keep silent, ev'ry voice in concert ring,  
evermore and evermore!*

**Prayers of the People:**

**[Beth Woelk and Doug Schulz]**

For our Prayers of the People today, Pastor Doug and I invite you to join your hearts with ours in this prayer adapted from the Kairos Canada Epiphany Resource:

The voice of the Lord is over the waters.

**God, call us to enter the waters with you.**

As we enter the waters, we become new.

**Make us into your new creations. Help us to be truly alive.**

Like Jesus, help us to hear your voice in the waters,  
the voice that calls us Beloved.

**Help us to hear your voice in all circumstances of our lives.**

Help us to entrust our loved ones, our joys, and our concerns, to you.

**Help us to hear your call in the sun, the air, and the water,  
in the cycles and seasons of the earth.**

Help us to resist oppression and injustice, especially systems that pollute our earth and waterways.

**Speak to us in our wilderness. Help us to be truly alive.**

**Grace Singers:            “When Jesus Comes to Be Baptized”**

*When Jesus comes to be baptized, he leaves the hidden years behind,  
the years of safety and of peace, to bear the sins of human-kind.*

*The Spirit of the Lord comes down, anoints the Christ to suffering,  
to preach the word, to free the bound, and to the mourner, comfort bring.*

*He will not quench the dying flame, and what is bruised he will not break,  
But heal the wound injustice dealt, and out of death his triumph make.*

*O Spirit help us be like Christ: to live in love and charity,  
to walk in truth and justice now, and grow in Christian dignity.*

*We praise you God, source of all life, we praise you Christ, eternal Word, we praise you, Spirit, gracious gift, your triune presence fills our world.*

**Scripture:**

**Mark 1: 4-11**

**[Doug Schulz]**

<sup>4</sup> John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." <sup>9</sup> In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

**Reflection/Readers' Theatre:**

**[Kevin McCabe & Doug Schulz]**

**"God-News Flash-Splash!"**

**Introduction [Doug]**

How did you wake up this morning? Was it your alarm clock? Did someone shake you awake? Did light from the window wash your face with a morning greeting?

When I was a child, my mother would come into my room, open the curtains and sing, "Good morning Merry Sunshine, how did you wake so soon?!" On weekdays I didn't mind that, 'cause I enjoyed going to school. But on weekends, I just wished Merry Sunshine would let me stay buried awhile longer under my blanket.

The Genesis 1 text we read earlier virtually shouts out, "Let there be light!" It sounds like a wake-up call, like a flash of good news, like a splash of new sight by which we can now perceive amazing shapes and the full spectrum of colours... all the true beauty of everything that God has made for us to experience in a richly aware life! In this season of Epiphany, the

announcement “let there be light!” calls us to “awake and arise” to gain and to follow the insight that God wants to give us right now!

When John the Baptist announced the ‘news flash’ that someone powerful sent from God would splash people with God’s Spirit to regenerate life within them and to embolden them to live by God’s ways on earth, he was providing an introduction to Jesus and the message of Jesus. That message? That “the way of God” in the world is too soon and too often compromised, and that to find the way back to God’s path is to follow Jesus day by day, in every part of our lives, even to the point of “taking up the cross”, as Jesus would come to say. That’s a message that invites us to be wide awake!

Today, I am grateful to Kevin McCabe for his recent Bible study work with the John the Baptist story. In a moment, Kevin and I will present a readers’ play that he has written, a voice-drama that shows how John the Baptizer stands in the prophetic stream, shall we say... in the tradition of Israel’s prophets who call on God to intervene in history. John sees Jesus as the One sent by God as Messiah who will overturn all worldliness and bring people into an obedient experience of being part of the ‘kin-dom’ of God. John expects Jesus to splash the world with God’s truth!

Yet we read in the gospels that within a few months of the day John baptizes Jesus, John is beheaded by the local Roman authorities. And within a couple of years, Jesus himself is killed by the cruel Roman method of crucifixion. In the case of Jesus’ execution, the citizens of Israel very vocally join in the death wish! Why did that happen? How is it that people did not accept the Light that Jesus represented?

Kevin’s play that we will ‘perform’ by voice now takes a somewhat whimsical, lighter approach. But the humorous twist also brings with it a thrust: It makes us ask why it is that the religious and political establishments of all time seem to persecute those who want to do God’s true work in the world, as Jesus did. What is it about John’s and Jesus’ approach to religion and the spiritual life that leads to persecution and rejection? Why are Christians in some parts of the world severely persecuted still today? And why do members within the same church or family sometimes have such strong disagreements with each other about what it means to be a Christian?

Our little drama right now won't answer those questions completely. But it does help reveal how we human beings can too often work harder to resist God's truth than to accept it. Let's see what this dialogue between John the Baptist and a character named Ananias the Pharisee reveals about the call to full discipleship. What follows is a made-up (somewhat modernized) dramatization using biblical events, ideas and language. Here we go, traveling back about 2000 years into history...

Here comes John the Baptist through the swirling desert sands. What's he saying!

John [Kevin]: "'Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Israel must turn from its evil ways, and prepare for the coming of the Messiah. As the prophet Malachi spoke to our ancestors: 'Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple...'"

Ananias [Doug]: "Uh, excuse me, but before you really get going with your message, would you mind answering a few questions?"

John: "I don't believe I've had the pleasure."

Ananias: "I am Ananias the Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin. In fact, I am the chairman of the credentials committee."

John: "And what brings you here?"

Ananias: "Our mandate is to examine the claims of prophets, as well as other unauthorized self-proclaimed spokesmen for the God of Israel."

John: "That must keep you busy."

Ananias: "Quite so. The world has gone mad on prophets. I have had to travel as far as Galilee recently. But I would rather go even there than to this god-forsaken desert."

John: "How do you sniff out these false prophets?"

Ananias (holding his nose): "I would prefer to use some other metaphor. Many of these claimants to prophetic status do not practise regular

hygiene. But to come to the point: you may be aware that the last prophet recognized by Israel's rulers, namely, Zechariah, proclaimed that those who play the false prophet should be put to death."

John: "Yes, I do read the scriptures sometimes. And I would to God that all false prophets, false priests, and false teachers of the Law should be stoned."

Ananias: "Ahem! Well, enough of that. Here I have a list of specific questions about your ministry. It would help me if you answer them in this particular order. First, what is your name and parentage?"

John: "My name is John, the son of Zechariah the priest, and his wife Elizabeth."

Ananias: "Well, it is promising that you are of a priestly family. And here's a related question. When I arrived just now, you were giving moral counsel to a motley crew of tax collectors, soldiers, and sinners. Do you claim to be a teacher of the Law?"

John: "No. I preach repentance to all people. Israel needs to prepare right this moment for the coming of the Lord and the Day of Judgment."

Ananias: "Ah, but we Pharisees have nothing to repent of. We are blameless in the sight of the Law. And we have Abraham for our Father!"

John: "Then bear fruit which indicates repentance. For God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham."

Ananias: "Take care, prophet, what you say! You may be able to address the multitudes in that tone, but not the rulers of Israel!"

John: "And yet I have done just that, and many have submitted to a baptism of repentance."

Ananias: "Remarkable! For, as yet, the rulers have not approved your ministry. Can you give me the names of these backsliders?"

John: "Yes, I believe that their names were Viper One, Viper Two, and Viper Three."

Ananias: “They were all of the same family then?”

John: “I believe that they were originally of the Devil’s family. Yet they had the wisdom to flee from the wrath to come.”

Ananias: “Good. Now we’re getting somewhere. Next question: are you the Messiah?”

John: No, I am not.”

Ananias: “Whew! I’m glad of that. Okay then. Are you Elijah, whom Malachi says will return before the Judgement Day?”

John: “No. Not him neither.”

Ananias: “Ah, this is going smoothly now. How about the Prophet whom Moses spoke of?”

John: “No, I am not the Prophet.”

Ananias: “We need something definite about your ministry. How would you identify yourself?”

John: “I give you the words of the prophet Isaiah; namely, that I am ‘the voice of one crying in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

Ananias: “Yes, well such unauthorized preachers are a shekel a dozen. But I am especially concerned that you are baptizing without our permission. What do you say to that?”

John: “I baptize with water as a sign of repentance, but, when the Messiah comes, he will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with Power!”

Ananias: “OOH! It would be easier to fulfill my mission were it not for these insects hopping and jumping on me!”

John: “These are locusts. God provides food for Israel even in the desert. Why don’t you try a couple? They’re kosher.”

Ananias: “I believe that I’ve just taken a vow not to break my fast until I return to Jerusalem! Now where did we leave off? Oh, baptism. Yes, is your baptizing a sign that the redemption of Israel is near?”

John: “I came baptizing with water that the Messiah of God might be revealed unto Israel. Indeed, the Messiah stands among you this very day!”

Ananias: “Among this rabble! That sounds like blasphemy!”

John: “The Day of the Lord is knocking on the door, even as we speak!”

Ananias (sarcastically): “Well, if the Messiah should show up today, here in this desert, please tell him that the Sanhedrin would like to meet him!”

John: “I will pass the message on. Meanwhile, I suggest that you be on your way before the evening shadows provide more cover for robbers and brigands.”

Ananias: “Yes, certainly. One cannot be too careful, especially when one is among sinners and those without the Law. But I must warn you that the Sanhedrin will be reluctant to award you prophetic credentials.”

John: “Tell the Sanhedrin to prepare themselves for He who is to come. And not to worry about me.”

Ananias: “That may be good advice, whatever way you mean it.”

John: “Prepare to meet the one who comes in the name of the Lord—all of you who await the Consolation of Israel.”

## **Transition**

Doug: Thank you, Kevin, for making the story of John the Baptist come alive a little bit for us here in the 21st year of the 21st century. You draw attention at the end of your play to the idea that what God’s people were looking for was “consolation” from the Spirit of God. Yet when John and Jesus tell everyone what is required – repentance from sin - all those attitudes and behaviours that distract us from contemplation of God within and among and all around us, and therefore create in us a sense of separation from our Creator... When people are given that clear call to a

pure spirituality, it seems the most religious types of that time seemed so blind to the sincerity of Jesus' message, not to mention the miracles that he did. Jesus is seen as a religious radical or even a liar. He is painted as false, and dangerous. Or,, at least, as a total 'loser'. Can you explain that a bit further?

Kevin: It seems that Israel's earliest leaders, beginning with Moses and the Judges, frequently combined both religious and military functions. Even the earliest kings—Saul, David, and Solomon—retained some of the priestly and prophetic role of the Judges. However, in time, a dissociation developed between the priestly and prophetic functions, leading first to tension and then conflict between them. With the construction of Solomon's temple, the priestly role developed a prestige closely association with the monarchy itself.

Doug: So, the priests of the Bible were really all just driven by pride of position? Were none of them sincerely spiritually-minded?

Kevin: Well, in effect, it became the role of the priests to attend to temple and public worship, and to carry on sacrifices in the prescribed manner. The priests then were upholders of tradition and maintained a pattern of established worship from generation to generation.

Doug: So, how were the prophets different?

Kevin: Prophets, on the other hand, brought a direct message from God, as we might say, "hot off the press," which was often at odds with established religion. We already see the prophet Amos in controversy with Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, back around 750 B.C. Thus priests such as Amaziah often acted as spokespeople for the monarchy and the religious establishment.

With the decline of theologically significant prophecy after about 400 B.C., the importance of the priestly class, and the interpreters of the Mosaic Law, increased. Thus, at the time of John the Baptist and Jesus, the religious establishment tended to denigrate any claims to prophetic utterance, and to practice an "in-house" religion.

Doug: So, John and Jesus didn't have a chance, is that what you're saying?!

Kevin: John's Gospel quotes the High Priest Caiaphas as saying that it would be necessary to put Jesus to death, partly because he threatened the religious establishment. Caiaphas said to the Sanhedrin, "Do you not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish?"

This often seems to be the attitude of entrenched religious establishments, namely, that it is better to do away with prophets, heretics, and dissenters, than to upset the status quo. In Dostoyevsky's novel the "Brothers Karamazov", he presents the Grand Inquisitor of Spain as speaking on behalf of the importance and correctness of using imprisonment, torture, and execution to deal with anyone who challenges the established church.

### **Conclusion [Doug]**

Your historical perspective is very helpful, Kevin, to explain why Jesus' own life got cut short so quickly after he started his ministry. He had only been teaching and preaching for three years, apparently, before his crucifixion. Clearly, if he had just talked to people about praying more or giving more money to the temple, he would have been seen as a good preacher or teacher. But he taught people to question every religious thing they did to see if it was really what God would want them to do. He told people to "Awake, arise, and realize God is calling you now, to be God's true people in a world that too often is so blind about living for peace and justice, for renewal and transformation of the spiritual life."

God is calling us to contemplation of what our created existence really means, and calling us to action as we follow Jesus, empowered by the Spirit as Jesus was. So, let's walk the way that leads us to the River of Life, every day, to "splash" in the blessings of God as we pray, as we play, as we stay close to the One who washes us always in the Light of Grace.

### **Hymn of Response: "As I went down to the river"**

*As I went down to the river to pray, studyin' about that good old way,  
and who shall wear the starry crown, Good Lord show me the way.*

*Refrain:*

*Oh, sisters (brothers, children, people) let's go down,  
let's go down, come on down.*

*Oh, sisters (brothers, children, people) let's go down,  
down to the river to pray.*

*As I went down to the river to pray, studyin' about that good old way,  
And who shall wear the robe and crown, Good lord show me the way.*

**Benediction:**

Receive God's infinite blessing,  
that shines all around us by day and by night!  
Go out into the world to re-enter the waters of your baptism.  
Go out to seek, and find, true life.  
Go out to enter into the new thing that God is doing.  
Go out to resist injustice, and to follow Christ into the wilderness.  
In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

**Sending Hymn:            "See Whose Glory Fills the Skies"**

*See whose glory fills the skies: Jesus, the light of the world!  
Sun of righteousness, arise: Jesus, the light of the world!*

*Refrain:*

*We'll walk in the light! Beautiful light!  
Shine where the dew-drops of mercy shine bright.  
Oh, shine all around us by day and by night,  
Jesus the light of the world.*

*Pierce the gloom of sin and grief, Jesus the light of the world!  
Scatter all my unbelief, Jesus the light of the world!*

*More and more thyself display, Jesus the light of the world!  
Shining to the perfect day, Jesus the light of the world!*

*Visit, then, this soul of mine, Jesus the light of the world!  
Fill me, Radiance divine! Jesus, the light of the world!*