

B Epiphany 1 BFC 2018
Mark 1:4-11
January 7, 2018

As I have shared, I grew up in a small town just outside of Peoria, Illinois, that was right on the cusp between being a rural, farming community to being a suburban, bedroom community for the headquarters of the declining transnational corporation of Caterpillar Tractor company. Metamora was the small town, football giant, taking on some of the Peoria area schools and beating them and, eventually, then becoming part of a conference with them. Those were primary narratives for my life. When our team moved through the playoffs onto its first State Championship, our organist, to the delight of the congregation, played the school fight song as the worship postlude one Sunday.

My family could not be totally on board. My dad was the high school baseball coach, the only head coach who was also not an assistant football coach, so his job seemed at risk. At risk especially after the strongly Christian head football coach targeted the varsity track coach for dismissal and replaced him with an assistant football coach. Year round, weight training needed to be done by the football team. It was important that everybody be on board.

I watched my dad as he struggled with his faith during this time, Moderator of the Church Council, but, at times, refusing communion as the tray was passed through the pew. I knew that he didn't really sleep for several weeks in a row as people would stop him on the street to tell him they were sorry. They had heard he had been fired. He struggled as he was ordered by the school principal to start football players over other baseball teammates who were outperforming them.

My dad also knew too much. As football player after football player gave credit to Jesus for stellar performances, my dad knew the football coach was, on the sly, telling baseball players they would not start on the football team unless they lifted during baseball season, and, the highly Christian football coach was also having an affair with the varsity women's basketball coach leading to her refusing to name the child's father.

So I had serious doubts about Christian faith and its real impact on the world. My dad had his faults but I experienced him as a man of integrity, and, well, my dad. I was really ready to throw the baby out with the baptismal bathwater.

As I was being pushed to accept Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior by the football Christianity that pervaded my small community, I was also being peppered with questions from my father about Christianity's claims. On long car rides with the family, he would ask, "Jesus says, 'Just ask and it will be given to you,' do you really think that is how

it happens? All you have to do is ask? Maybe I'll ask for a new car next week." I tried my best, as a Junior High son, to be the defender of the faith. But I had doubts of my own.

I was the only one, of thirteen confirmands at my local UCC church, to turn to my pastor just before confirmation and say, "I'm not sure I believe all of this stuff. I don't think I should be confirmed." I remember thinking that if theology and Christian faith were really about what heaven looked like, whether the fanciful and violent prophecies in Revelations were of primary concern, and figuring out the details of heavenly beings like cherubim and seraphim, maybe I just wasn't cut out for it. In particular, as pimples, sexual desire, and my inadequacies as a teenager all broke upon me at the same time, maybe I just wasn't good at this Christianity stuff. Let me make clear. None of those things were being taught by my local church pastor or shared with me in confirmation, but that's what I heard from the football Christianity taught in my local community. Give my life to Jesus and the anxiety over those things and all life questions would all go away? That seemed, at the very least, suspect.

As I have developed a different lens for Christian faith, that concern for the ethereal and otherworldly seems not only suspect but blasphemous. Biblical faith is strongly based in the material. I think our inability to recognize that, as people of faith, is killing us and allowing our relationship with the very basis of faith to be cheapened in favor of the unearthly realm.

The baptism of Jesus begins with the description of John the Baptist which grounds both Jesus and John in the material and their relationships to the good earth. John is described in the Scripture passage as wholly dependent on God and as a man of righteousness--not through some aura or supernatural sign but in listing four different relationships he has with the material world. He wears camel's hair and a leather belt. He eats locusts and wild honey. As I have related in previous sermons, this not only grounds John in the material world, it shows that his spirituality and livelihood does not depend on the bread and circuses of the Roman Empire. He does not eat the Roman meal. Yes, he eats bugs for lunch.

Jesus is then baptized in the muddy rivers of the Jordan but also has the skies break open and the Spirit of God alight on him like a dove. The water, skies, and the dove are all signs from a God invested in the material and signals that Jesus, too, is not invested in the Roman story but in something more heavenly, spiritual, and transcendent. Let me say that again, God's investment in the material earth is a foretaste of Jesus's ministry being more heavenly, spiritual, and transcendent than Rome's gospel. Rome justified its violence and domination through otherworldly battles where Jupiter and Roma conferred divine power to its emperors. In fact, Augustus Caesar conferred himself the title *Pontifex*

Maximus, the chief priest of Rome, and head of the *Collegium Pacificum*, the high priests in the land. Augustus brought back many of the traditional social rules and religious rituals all to make Rome great again.¹

God sanctioned Jesus through the material world. Rome sanctioned emperors through the otherworldly.

This is not some new thing in the Bible with the arrival of Jesus. Way back in the book of Genesis, God creates, looks out over all creation, and declares the material world “very good.” God owns the land and gives the land over to human community for the prospering of all of creation. Rome claims ownership of the land and gives it over to the elite, wealthy, and ruling class believing that this this will prosper all of creation. These are the two narratives that run headlong into one another in the First Century, making the Jewish people a dangerous lot over and against Rome’s empire. Who owns the land?

That is not just a First Century conflict. That is a tale, to borrow a Disney song, as old as time. It continues, in Biblical order, with the Ten Commandments. We have often heard the second commandment as not making any idol or image which we call god or primary priority to which we give our worship or bow down before. But the whole of the second commandment is a prohibition against bowing down and serving idols with your possessions or produce—your land, your salary, your capital—in service of that idol. Do not give material to the immaterial. This commandment was a direct response to Pharaoh’s extractive economy of taking people’s possessions to impoverish them. In contrast to Pharaoh’s extractive economy, the Ten Commandments are about developing a social-economic relationship of neighborliness so that families and communities might thrive through the sharing of resources like land and possessions.² The divine is found in the material bases of life and how the material bases of life are shared.

Christian origins scholar, Richard Horsley, believes that the apostle Paul continues in this great Jewish teaching. He wrote, “Paul repeatedly exhorted the assemblies to withdraw as much as possible from dealings with the local imperial economy, ‘the [Roman] world’ of supposed ‘peace and security’ that was ‘passing away.’ In contrast to the vertical imperial extraction of resources, Paul pressed for the horizontal sharing of their meager possessions among subject peoples, working for ‘the good of all’”³

The material nature of Biblical teaching does not let us break off the political, economic, and the spiritual into separate categories which can bend and twist words like liberation and freedom into words fit only for the individual soul. The material nature of

¹ “Augustus,” *The Roman Empire in the First Century*, http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/augustus_religion.html.

² Richard Horsley in the *Foreward* to Walter Brueggemann, *Money and Possessions, Interpretation Series* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), pp. xi-xii.

³ *Ibid*, citing 1 Corinthians 7:29-31, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, and Galatians 6:10, p. xv.

baptism as evidenced by John with camel's hair and leather belt for his clothing and locusts and wild honey for his diet, and water, sky, and dove for the association of the divine with his practice is made even more strongly material when we recognize that Christ's baptism is done embodied. The baptism of Jesus is a "material body" experience, not some dusting or sprinkling, but an immersion. One of our two holy sacraments in the Protestant tradition, baptism is a materially embodied experience.

Two years ago, the great Hebrew Scripture scholar, Walter Brueggemann, published a book titled "Money and Possessions." In that book, he argued that the "Bible is relentlessly material in its focus and concern" and, he goes on to write, "[e]verywhere the Bible is preoccupied with bodily existence."⁴ By relentless, Brueggemann is trying to make clear that the Bible will not be sidetracked by a concern for the supernatural and otherworldly. The Biblical mythologies, when deciphered, take us right back to material concern and a preoccupation with bodily existence.

As I said earlier, one of the primary Biblical statements is that God owns the land and gives it to the whole community for its welfare, benefit, and livelihood. That is a counter-narrative to all imperial claims. In Ezekiel, chapter 29, verse 3, that is made abundantly clear. "Thus says the Holy One, the Living God, I am against you, Pharaoh, king of Egypt, the great dragon sprawling in the midst of its channels, saying, 'My Nile is my own; I made it myself.'"

Kingdom and pharaohs, empires and caesars, multinationals and presidents, may try to make you believe they are self-made and owners of creation. The fact is, Pharaoh did not make the Nile. The Nile made Pharaoh and his empire.

Those statements, that God owns the land and that the Bible is relentlessly material and has a preoccupation with the body, Brueggemann believes, find their foundation when the Priestly writer in Genesis, Chapter 1, has God look out over all creation and declares all of creation very good.

And that is the point I want to remind us of today. This good earth is the body in which we move, live, and have our being. There is no ethereal, otherworldly place where our faith is acted out.

I am part of the UCC Council for Climate Justice and this month we are promoting across the whole United Church of Christ 1000 sermons for climate justice in solidarity. We are doing this in solidarity with 21 children and young adults who are suing the federal government over climate change. Their case will supposedly be decided the first week of February. We need a movement. And we need it yesterday to turn the tide. We need to remember the material nature of our baptisms (leather belt, camel's hair, locusts,

⁴ Ibid, but this is Brueggemann, p. 11.

wild honey, shell, evergreen bough, water, sky, dove, and full body), and the gifts we have been given as a trust in land, water, animal. As the president declares his intent to drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, we need to remember our baptisms and turn the tide.

The convener of the UCC Council for Climate Justice, Brooks Berndt, sent out a staggering quote from climate justice scientist, Camille Parmesan. In an interview with *The Guardian*, dated New Years' Eve, Parmesan said, "Things will shift to the extremely negative in the next 50 years. Climate scientists are doing decadal projects and it starts really shifting about 2070-2090. That is in my children's lifetimes. They will have to deal with it. That's what makes me angry. Policymakers are mostly in their 50s and they will be dead by then. The worst impacts will hit their grandchildren."⁵ The worst impacts will hit my grandchildren.

Today I ask you to keep both the material baby and the bathwater and remember your baptisms. John the Baptist was out in that wilderness dressed in camels and cows, eating the stuff of bugs and bees. He baptized Jesus with signs of water, sky, and dove. Remember the material stuff of faith to help start a movement. We have been given this good earth as a trust and sacrament. May we be faithful. Amen.

⁵ "Camille Parmesan: 'Trump's extremism on climate change has brought people together'," *The Guardian*, December 31, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/dec/31/camille-parmesan-trump-extremism-climate-change-interview>.