



Baptism of the Lord  
Sunday, January 10, 2021

## On Turning Over New Leaves

The Reverend Dr. John A. Dalles

*Genesis 1:1-10, Mark 1:4-11*

Recently I was looking at the towering oak trees in our front yard, twin trees that are forty-three years old. That made me wonder what the oldest tree in Allegheny County might be. Therefore, I researched it. You perhaps know about it already. It is not on a piece of private property; it is in a park. It is not hard to get to — there are signs and a path. It does not shout, it whispers, of more than four centuries of standing tall, growing, and thriving. The tree is a white oak. There is a stone sign in front of that ancient tree, with an inscription that says it took root in 1598.

Over the course of one year, such a tree produces more than half a million leaves. Multiply that by 423 years, and you get 211,500,000 leaves, give or take a few. I am just glad I do not have to rake them. Nevertheless, it does tell me that something that starts out small can, over time, become gigantic, in terms of how far it reaches, who it nurtures, and what it provides.

It is like what happens in our New Testament lesson, when one little moment of time, and a few drops of water, began a worldwide 2,000-year Christian faith that has spread like the branches of a 400-year-old oak tree, drawing people into its shelter.

Back in the day, which we read about in the very first chapter of Mark's Gospel, we could say that Jesus was turning over a new leaf. He was beginning something new, choosing a different focus for His life, changing His way of relating to others. Out there, when He was baptized, we can learn from what He did. In **our** baptism, things happen like what happened to Jesus:

1. We receive the Spirit of God, who remains with us.
2. We are called children of God.
3. We hear God is "well pleased" with us.

**One: We receive the Spirit of God, who remains with us.** Baptism is the entry point of faith. Jesus, in His baptism, publicly aligns Himself with everything that God desires. It is a moment of revelation. We look on, as if we were there on the Jordan's banks, noticing something unique is going on. In baptism, Jesus enacts, confirms, and shows us what is already true. He received the Spirit of God.

The Spirit is seen. The Spirit is heard. The dove descends. The words come from heaven, saying:

*"You are My Son, whom I love; with You I am well pleased."*

At that moment, something about Jesus becomes new and different. Jesus is set aside for God's holy purpose. Jesus will do things now that He had not done before. We call it His "Galilean ministry." As He calls disciples, travels the countryside, and shares the good news, Jesus teaches truth and raises the dead.

Before His baptism, very little is recorded or remembered. After His baptism, we savor every line the Gospel writers recorded. Everything Jesus says and does, has lasting inspiration.

Baptism draws a line, between what was then, and what is now. The leaf turns. The curtain falls on whatever consumed Jesus' days beforehand, and rises on this next chapter of doing God's will. Just as we see and hear the Spirit of God descending upon and approving of Jesus, so too, at our own baptism, we receive the Spirit of God. The leaf is turned. We start over, we act in a different manner, we change our attitude. We place ourselves in God's hands. We are made new.

**Two: We are called children of God.** *"You are My Son, the Beloved; with You I am well pleased."* It makes us pay riveted attention to Jesus, doesn't it, to have God speak and show this? If there was any question about who Jesus is and how He related to the Almighty, God makes it absolutely clear. Jesus is God's Son.

As God's Son, Jesus' authority surpassed any prophet or angels. As God's Son, Jesus knows God as no one else does and so is able to reveal God's purpose and will to His followers. As God's Son, Jesus is our example of how to relate to God as Father. As God's Son, Jesus invited human beings to know God fully. As God's Son, Jesus clearly showed God's love to us. As God's Son, Jesus taught His followers that they should address God as "Father." As God's Son, Jesus is God's appointed ruler and king. As God's Son, Jesus is obedient to God. As God's Son, Jesus becomes the medium through which humankind now comes to God and comes to know God. As God's Son, Jesus has the authority to forgive sin. As God's Son, Jesus had a specific task: to fulfill the Jewish expectations of the Messiah by dying for the sins of the world.

When we align ourselves with Jesus, who is God's Son, then the meaning of Jesus' baptism for us is that we are baptized into something. A change happens, at baptism, no matter what our age may be. We enter into the joy of the Son who knows God and makes God known. And the leaf is turned. We start over, we act in a different manner, we change our attitude. We place ourselves in God's hands. We are made new.

**Three: We hear God is well pleased with us.** God's Holy Spirit speaks a few succinct words to define who the newly-baptized Jesus is. Until then, people called Him Mary and Joseph's son — that wise kid who taught the elders in the temple; that carpenter whose workmanship was fine. And then, baptism happens. Jesus is defined anew. As He places Himself before God, He relinquishes who He has been, becoming who He can be, in this expanded relationship with the Almighty.

Describing Jesus, coming out of the water, Mark uses the word *"euthus"* (pronounced, Yew-THEEES, like it rhymes with "few fleece") for the first of forty-one times he will use it in his Gospel. *Euthus* can mean a number of things. In Mark's Gospel, it is most often translated as, "immediately."

If we are cautious people, then "immediately" is not a word we are drawn to. We like the word "eventually" more. However, there is a time for the immediate. We put ourselves in God's company, in the waters of baptism. In the presence of God's Spirit, things **do** happen immediately. God changes us **immediately**.

As a congregation, Shadyside Presbyterian Church is turning over a new leaf this morning, because this is the very first time that we have offered livestreaming of our worship service directly from our sanctuary to you who may be joining us. Shadyside has a long history of doing innovative ministry. And of course most notably is that this congregation was the very first to broadcast its worship services over the radio. There's a plaque here in the sanctuary reminding us of that, as well as the first radio broadcast of worship to the North Pole and the South Pole.

It is a remarkable part of our history and something that I was well aware of as I was growing up here in Pittsburgh, and as I was serving for a decade at Fox Chapel Presbyterian Church.

Fast forward to the twenty-three years when I served Wekiva Presbyterian Church in Florida. It was mid-2004 when I went to one of our charter members there whose expertise is in the area of sales and marketing, via computers and the Internet. I told David I had this idea. We were not in a position to afford a radio broadcast of worship, and certainly not a television broadcast of worship. But I wondered if it might be possible for us to do a broadcast of worship over the Internet. David liked the idea and said he would look into it; and after he did, he got back to me and said, "John, the technology just isn't there." I thanked him, and I just put the idea on the shelf.

So, about six months later, when I got a phone call from Dave, and the first words out of his mouth were, "John, we can do it!", I said, "We can do what?" He said, "I now think that we have the technology we need to do a webcast of worship live from our sanctuary." So we got busy; put everything in place; and, in January 2005, Wekiva Presbyterian Church was the first church anywhere to offer a live webcast of worship (which continues now sixteen years later).

For Shadyside Presbyterian Church, what we are doing today is like unto that. I am deeply grateful to everyone on our A/V Task Force, and especially to our technical experts, Jesse Naus and Stephen Donnelly, who are up in the balcony this morning, making this first-ever Shadyside live worship webcast a reality.

It is the turning over of a new leaf. It is beginning something we have not done before. And the idea behind it is that there are people who cannot get to worship — they are perhaps physically prevented; or they are out of town on business, or vacation; or they are just beyond our reach, geographically. We are making it possible for them — and, in this pandemic season, for you — to come to us and join us in worship.

I am most grateful to be here at Shadyside Presbyterian Church, as we as a congregation begin this ministry this morning. We are reaching out in Jesus' name; we are sharing Jesus' love; we are responding to Jesus' grace.

So I invite you to turn to God — immediately. Let that leaf turn. Start over. Act differently. Change your attitude. Place yourself in God's hands. Be made new. Continue to treasure your own baptism. It is like basking in the shade of a 400-year old tree.

1. Remember you have received the Spirit of God, who remains with you.
2. Rejoice that you are a child of God.
3. And rely on this truth: God is well pleased with you.

Amen.