

Baptism and Violence

Mark 1: 4-11

Jennie Ott ☿ First Congregational Church of Minnesota UCC ☿ 11 January 2009
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It is a masterpiece of American cinematography,
the 1972 Francis Ford Coppola classic, *The Godfather*,
which I watched for the first time, in its entirety, over the holidays.

If you know the plot, then you know there are five families who rule the New York City Mafia,
one in each borough.
We follow the Corleone family,
led by the Don, Vito Corleone, played by Marlon Brando.
Since you've had over 30 years to watch it, I'll assume I'm not spoiling the ending,
but when Vito dies,
it is his son Michael, who takes over as head of the family.

One of the reasons I finally decided to watch this movie
is because I have always heard about its famous ending montage.
The camera pans into a large stone church.
It is cavernous and cold
as the priest's voice echoes in Latin throughout the near-empty sanctuary.
A family stands around the baptismal font
and among them is Michael Corleone
who has agreed to become the godfather of his nephew.
He stands before the priest, who begins reciting the baptismal vows.
Between each vow the film cuts to another location in a nearby neighborhood,
where we see members of the other four families being killed by one of Michael's
henchmen.
It is one of the most disturbing scenes in film.
"Do you renounce Satan?" the priest asks Michael.
Yes, he answers, and then we see a gruesome murder.

It continues this way. Vow, then murder. Vow, then murder. Vow, then murder.

It is unsettling to say the least, and it challenges everything we know about baptism,
about what it means to be welcomed into the loving realm of God.
And yet it captures, in some ways, the very reality of our lives,
the reality of sin, of violence, of evil, and of bloodshed.

At the end of this montage,
one is left questioning the human capacity for good and evil.
One looks at the baby boy and wonders if he is just being baptized into a new generation of violence.

Although some five thousand miles from the streets of New York,
the river Jordan carves its ways through the hills of northern Israel.
It's headwaters gush out of the earth at Tel Dan,
a beautiful nature preserve near the Lebanese border that was once the home of the Tribe of Dan.

From there the Jordan runs south, toward the Sea of Galilee.
Today pilgrims can dip a foot or two in the river,
 and there is even a site, the purported site of Jesus' baptism,
 with a pull-off and parking signs,
 where each day busloads of people wade in the water,
 repenting and being dunked in the very space where Jesus may have stood.
Undoubtedly, they hope to experience the heavens being opened,
 maybe even the descent of a dove,
 and perhaps even the words themselves,
"You are my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased."

Yet today one could easily cut to some different scenes in nearby neighborhoods:
 Katuysa rockets blowing up nursing homes in Northern Israel,
 missiles plunging into U.N. schools in the Gaza strip,
 men and women pouring into the streets from their bombed out homes,
 a mother carrying her bleeding child to a hospital.

Seeing these images in our newspapers, on our TVs, and on our computer screens
 challenges what we know about the human capacity for good and evil.
We are left to wonder, are we just initiating the next generation of violence?

It was just two and half years ago
 that I boarded a bus
 about two miles from where Jesus was supposedly baptized.
I was on my way to Jersualem, at last,
 after four weeks on an archaeological dig.
The dig itself was great.
 I had been living along the Sea of Galilee,
 digging up the ruins of an ancient Roman town.
 I had spent the previous weeks visiting many biblical sites,
 retracing many of Jesus' steps,
 but the trip had taken a turn about two and a half weeks before,
 when war broke out between Israel and Lebanon.

The whole tone of the dig changed.
 American and Polish universities scrambled to evacuate their students from our dig.
Those of us who were foreigners and who were there by ourselves
 had to choose whether to stay or go,
 and half our crew left.
We even lost a few of our a dig leaders,
 who, as Israeli-citizens, were called up for military duty.

It made for a nerve-racking few weeks,
 as rockets hit not far from where we were digging—
 the closest being three miles to the north.
We grew accustomed to the sounds of shelling and air raid sirens.
In our region, the Hezbollah leaders in Lebanon were usually aiming for Tiberias,
 the city five miles across the Sea of Galilee.
We would hear the sirens, crawl out of our holes, and watch the smoke billowing up as rockets hit the
city.

By the end of the dig, I was ready to go.
So that's how I came to catch the bus about two miles east of the baptismal spot.
It was the first time I had ridden the bus since the war broke out,
and what I saw on that day shocked me.

As you may know Israel has mandatory military service after high school,
and as I got on the bus, it was filled with young people –
18 and 19 year olds, wearing sashes of bullets.
At each stop more would get on – they were headed north to the Lebanese border.

I sat there – a seminary graduate,
on my summer vacation,
on my way to becoming a minister,
on my way to preaching about, teaching about, trying to live out God's love,
and here were all these young people
on their way to war.

It was on that bus that I had one of the most stunning realizations of my life:
I was part of this violence.

It went a little something like this:
I remember watching one particular young woman get on the bus,
and as she walked toward me, I suddenly thought:
"My tax dollars are paying for your bullets –
those bullets, which are around your neck,
which you are going to load into your gun,
and fire at Lebanese people.
I'm 29 and enjoying my summer vacation.
You are 19 and on your way to the front lines.
I have a passport that gets me out of this country no problem.
You have a passport that requires you to serve."

I remember being disgusted at my own privilege,
at realizing how complicit I was just by virtue of my citizenship.
I felt helpless.

But then I remember feeling something else.
Relief.
Relief that I was headed south, away from the rocket fire.
Relief that she were headed north, to defend me.
That wave of relief surprised me, and I suppose in some ways shamed me, too.

In that moment, I felt like the Godfather at the baptismal font,
making these pledges to support life, but knowing full well I was participating in death.

In a way, I suppose that happens all the time.,
not just with Israel/Palestine, but in any kind of war of which our country is a part –
Iraq, Afghanistan.

Just by virtue of being American
we are complicit with horrible military, economic, and human rights injustices.
And just by virtue of being a lot of things –
in my case white, educated, middle class,
I am a participant in all kinds of oppressive structures –
even here on my own soil.

I think that's why these days I often feel so overwhelmed when I open the newspaper.
I am overwhelmed by the sense of helplessness. The sense of shock.
The sense of wanting to do something, but not knowing what.
The sense that I am part of all of this, whether I want to be or not.
But then I also get the sense that certainly my faith, my values,
should have something to say about what's going on.

So what can we do?
What hope is there?
What is our role, not just as Americans, not just as concerned global citizens,
but as people of faith? And particularly as baptized Christians?

I think this is where our text this morning may lend us some insight.

The scene of the baptism of Jesus,
it isn't what we usually see here at First Church.
Back then, there was no quaint font, no christening dress, no hymns, no carrying around the newly
baptized while they sang to him or her...
Mark tells us that when Jesus was baptized,
God literally tore apart the heavens –
it was a violent act.
That same verb is used only once again,
when Jesus dies,
and the temple curtain is violently torn in half.
Yet God's voice still comes out of the tearing,
so perhaps what we learn is that somehow,
even in the midst of violence,
God can and does still speak.
And if God speaks through the tearing of the heavens,
then how much louder does God's voice cry out in the tearing of lives and
livelihoods.

The message that comes out is also important: "You are my beloved Child."
In our baptism, we hear loud and clear what is already true,
that we are God's beloved children and that God's mercy and grace extends to us.
By virtue of our baptism, we are no longer responsible only to ourselves,
but to one another,
beloved of one another,
which means we not only care for our own families,
or for the people at First Church,
but for our brother and sisters around the world,

including the beloved of God who are in Israel, in Gaza,
in the West Bank, in Iraq, in Iran.

We are beloved, and they are beloved,
and beloved people do not raise swords or guns or rockets at one another.
Beloved people cry out for one another
And beloved people pray for one another.
And beloved people hope for one another.
So we can cry out and pray and hope for the God's beloved,
and live out our own belovedness by loving others.

And finally, part of our loving others involves listening.
In our baptism, in our belovedness, we also become listeners,
listening for the voice of God,
not just from the heavens but in one another,
for God's voice is in my neighbor's voice,
and in that of my friends, and maybe even in my enemies.
One of the things we must do,
most especially in places of violence,
is listen to one another.

Now there are those who will say we can only end violence with violence.
And those who will say we can only end violence with policy.
But I think there is something big to be said for relationship,
for learning how to love one another,
by listening to one another and seeking to understand one another.

On my first trip to Israel, which was six months before the archaeological dig,
I spent two weeks with some of my seminary classmates visiting peace and justice organizations
throughout Israel/Palestine.
We visited with leaders in government, non-profits, and religious movements,
and hands-down, those programs that were most effective in working for peace
were the ones that got people together,
talking to one another.

These were organizations like the Parent's Circle,
where parents of slain Palestinian children would meet for supper with parents of slain Israeli
children,
and they would share about their losses.

These were the programs that were helping to change minds and hearts,
because people actually got to know one another.

As God's beloved, as baptized Christians,
we owe it to ourselves and to our broader human family,
to support these kinds of programs and initiatives
that work for peace in nonviolent, loving, listening ways.

Friends, we know our world is in deep pain.
But if our baptism, if Christ's baptism, has anything to teach us,
it is that God's voice continues to echo off the waters,
and that we are God's beloved children.

Perhaps the waters of baptism can bathe us in mercy

and help us listen to the cries of those in need.
Perhaps the waters of baptism can cleanse us
of some of our own indifference, our own fear, our own worry.
Perhaps the waters of baptism can quench our thirst for justice
if we look for ways to live out our belovedness,
to listen for God's voice,
even in the midst of such violence.

It is the voice of God who reminds us of who we are,
but is also the voice of God who calls us into who we can be.
May we live out of that deep identity, that deep calling
to be God's beloved Child, in whom God is well pleased.
Amen.