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"Life giving compassion" The Rev. Kara Leslie (01/07/2024, First Sunday after the Epiphany)

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Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable unto you, O Lord, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we pray.

Amen.

Norford, Texas, not sure any of you vacation to herford, Texas, but it is about an hour

and a half north, west of Lubbock, and about an hour south, west of Amarillo, and about

an hour north of Mulechew. It's where the yellow dot is. Basically, it's in the middle

of nowhere in the panhandle. And when my children were young, I would gather them up, and

I'm talking 2, 4, 5, and we would get a babysitter, we would load up in the van, and we would

drive to demit first to pick up the oldest member of the church, and she would sit in the

front seat, and then we would drive on up to herford. And I would preside over services

at St. Thomas Episcopal Church in herford, Texas. It's no longer there, but twice a month

I would drive up there, and we would have services in the church. And then I'd leave my

children at the church with the babysitter with a little lunch, and I'd run around and

visit people in their homes and serve communion and check on them, and then I'd load everybody

up and take them back to Lubbock. And they would all take a nap, including the babysitter.

One of the things I really enjoyed is that when I would get there, we would sit around

the table, and we would fold bulletins, fold them, make sure they were all right, and share

the concerns and cares of the community of herford, Texas. One Sunday, when I was preaching

and right after my sermon, the lay Eucharistic minister, don't get any ideas, got up right after my sermon and walked out briskly. No idea what happened, but he quickly turned around and came back carrying this huge giant picture, the baptism of Jesus. He was awkwardly walking down the middle aisle, and what some of us were afraid he would fall, but he got to the front and he said, look, this is what? The baptism of the Lord looks like. So when I hear this scripture that we read today, I think of this elderly man carrying this huge picture to show the few of us that had gathered this beautiful moment of the dove descending upon Christ in the River Jordan. In all the gospels, there is a story about the baptism of Jesus, in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus walks from Galilee to the River Jordan, about 24 miles, and Luke, we have two verses about the baptism of Jesus, and that happened right after John is imprisoned. And then in the Matthew gospel, we have John, I mean, in the gospel of John, we read the baptisms took place in Bethany across from the River Jordan even further from the Sea of Galilee. And today, our reading from Mark has just, has Jesus coming from Nazareth of Galilee to the River Jordan. Nazareth is not an easy walk. It's not a flat service from Nazareth to the River Jordan. It is a hard four to six day hike. As you can tell, with the many mountains and treacherous terrain, Jesus was hiking to get to the Sea of Galilee. But the Sea of Galilee is important, is a place where he fed 5,000, where Jesus gave the sermon on the mount, and he called a few of the disciples from this area, and he walked on the water. The Sea of Galilee, the River Jordan, is significant in the story of Jesus, and it is significant that he is baptized in this community. Now, before all this happened, Mark, in Mark, John the Baptist appears in the wilderness. He's wearing camel clothes, and he has a leather belt around his waist. And he's eating locusts. And I figured that his favorite dipping sauce, because they always ask you that at Chick-fil-A, which dipping sauce, it must have been honey, because that's what he wanted to go with his locusts. And as the people are confessing their sins, John baptizes them in the River. Clearly, people needed to be released from the burdens of their sins, much like us.

The whole Judean countryside, all of Jerusalem, came out to this river, walked into the water to be there with John, to be forgiven for their sins. The people who hear this message are from a variety of places. They have different languages, different skin color, different religious backgrounds, and different stories. But they all come to this river, Jordan. And Jesus does too. John is very clear that Jesus is the one who is more powerful, who will come to baptize in the spirit. John is with water, Jesus is with spirit. John is a visible, tangible item, water, whereas the grace and love of Jesus Christ is not tangible, but even more powerful. Jesus was baptized, adept into this cool water on the river, Jordan, by the hand of John, and the heavens were torn apart and the spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove. And then a voice from the heavens came and said, you are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased. Powerful words from God to Jesus and to all who hear, including us today. These are a few paintings that are pretty famous for the baptism of the Lord. You will notice in this one that there's a lot of people gathered around and then there's angels and there's incense and them and they're playing musical instruments. And then in this one there's hardly any people present. There's three other people other than John and Jesus. And the backgrounds are so different in contrast to what is happening between Jesus and John. We have no idea of how deep the water is, but we know that John is there baptizing. And there is no sign of a visible dove coming down. This one is also interesting. If you see on the right hand side, or my right, you're right, the people that are coming out of the water are using towels. They're using towels to wipe off the water. Whereas Jesus is there in the middle. The gold is coming down from the sky. The dove is descending upon him and then there's angels on the left hand side. And finally this one is it's a vertical painting and God is at the top and then you'll see the spirit just slowly, slowly wind its way down and then there's a dove upon Jesus at the very bottom. There are all different stories about the baptism of Jesus and here again is a more modern picture that's in Brussels in a stained glass. But again you see two people plus Jesus a little

bitty bird. So it's a very different kind of rendition of the baptism of the Lord.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus was baptized? Have you ever wondered why did Jesus have to be

baptized? I mean he is part of God's family. He is sinless. Jesus is baptized and the dove comes

upon him and says you are my son, you are beloved, you are the son of God. So the divinity of

God of Jesus is clear. The humanity of Jesus is clear. So why does Jesus get baptized? Well I know

we have lots of things to do but I have two ideas of why I think Jesus gets baptized. Connection and

compassion. Jesus sees all these people and he comes and he gets in line and he goes down there

and he's hearing their stories of confession. He's hearing the burdens, he's feeling them because

of the immense compassion that Christ has for all of us. He hears your hurt, he hears your wounds,

he seeks to be in compassion relationship with you. Jesus when he goes to feed the 5,000

with the loaves and the fishes, he said he has compassion on them and then he turns to the

disciples and says we need to feed them. When he healed people he offered compassion to them

and when Jesus was all across he offered compassion to those around him. Jesus asked for forgiveness

yet again for them. Maybe Jesus could see in these people's eyes as they were going down to the river

Jordan the need for forgiveness and hope and so he came forward with compassion for the people.

He sees the burdens that we carry and he offers grace and freedom. He wanted to experience

baptism for our sake. This deep compassion leads to connection. If you have deep compassion for

something or someone you automatically have connection and it's a personal relationship with

Christ. Rebuilding a relationship with humanity was central in the life of Christ. As Aaron preached

last week Jesus came to offer life and grace and not the law. Now we can choose, it's a choice,

you can choose to connect with anger, with judgment, with power. We see this daily in our nation

and in our world. Maybe you've been in a relationship with someone who only knows how to connect with

you with control. Maybe they're direct with their controlling behavior by limiting your access to

say finances or the internet or a job. Or maybe they're a little bit less clear about it

and they do it with small ways by not communicating to you or undermining you in little ways that

are important to you. Jesus does not seek to control, manipulate, or put on the best guilt trip ever. This is not the connection that Christ offers each of you. Jesus is not afraid to come into the murky waters of your life. He is with you holding your hand and believing in you. And when we want to really connect with others, we extend Christ's light compassion. Jesus comes into all areas of our lives to be with us in every way, to love and genuinely care for our souls and to connect with us with a deep abiding compassion. This taller man and herfered held that picture up. And I remember him saying, do you see the dove and do you see Jesus? This is love. This is the love of Christ. Whatever your experience is, your hope or your expectations or your picture of baptism, whatever your picture is, may you see the face of Christ and his hand reaching out to you to connect and offer life-giving compassion. Amen.