

Gospel lesson

We open this Lenten season's Gospel readings by going back to the beginning of Jesus' ministry.



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/photos/john-baptist/>;
credit: LUMO

Mark 1:9-15 (NRSV)

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

¹² And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.

¹³ He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,

¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

*The word of God for the people of God***Interactive lesson**

pictures from <https://www.pexels.com/photo/medical-team-delivering-a-baby-in-the-maternity-ward-19751873/>; credit: Hannah Barata and from <https://www.pexels.com/photo/baby-inside-white-bathtub-with-water-914253/>; credit: Henley Design Studio

What happens in baptism? <Let them respond>

When a baby comes out of the womb, is it just getting out of the amniotic fluid that it was in?

<Let them respond>

What else happens when a baby is born?

<Let them respond; talk about 1st breath & closing of fetal (lung bypass) blood vessels due to change in pressure in the chest, redirecting blood to lungs>

Just as a newborn baby undergoes more changes when it is born than just getting out of the amniotic fluid, when we accept Christ and are baptized, we undergo a much more fundamental change than just being freed from sin. We take in a breath of life like the one God breathed into Adam at creation and we are transformed. Like a baby no longer relies on those lung bypass blood vessels, we are no longer reliant on what the UMC calls “prevenient grace”.

We are filled with the Holy Spirit and able to live with a completely different outlook on the world, one based on shared love instead of selfishness. In the

UMC, we refer to this moment as “justifying grace”.

When a baby is born, does it come out of the womb all clean? <Let them respond>

So how does it get clean? Does the baby cleanse itself? <Let them respond>

Just as a newborn baby needs someone bathe it, when we are born in Christ, the Holy Spirit cleanses us of sin, using the blood of Christ – which we can think of as the essence of Christ’s life, Jesus’ love and faithfulness for us. It is a gift from God.

How many times are we born? <Let them respond>

How many times do we bathe? <Let them respond>

Just as we are physically born only once, we are only baptized once. Because we live in a world filled with dirt, we are prone to getting dirty, and we need to take showers/baths on a regular basis. Because we live in a world filled with sin, we are prone to sin, to get our souls dirty again. How do we spiritually bathe, get clean again? <Let them respond>

In the UMC, we refer to that ongoing cleansing as “sanctifying grace”.

When first born, how much are babies able to do?
<Let them respond>

Like growing children, we need to grow in faith, to take time in communion with God (like Jesus did in the wilderness) so that we can face this sinful world with God’s love, to show others the kingdom of God

has come near for them too.

How do we tell that we are growing in faith? What are some of the things we do or see in ourselves or others, signs of growth in Christ? <Let them respond>

May each of you find healthy ways to grow in the grace of the Holy Spirit during this Lenten season.

<Hymn “Loving Spirit”

TFWS #2123>

Message: Has Come Near



picture from

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/depths-of-love/first-sunday-in-lent-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/first-sunday-in-lent-year-b-graphics>

Please pray with me?

Lord of all heaven and earth,
as we take time now to further consider today's scriptures, please

- speak Your words through my mouth,
- open our ears to hear Your message, and
- abide in our hearts,

That we may know ourselves more clearly,
and seek you more diligently. Amen.

We explore “Depths of Love” this Lenten season, beginning with consideration of just what “Has Come Near”:

“This first Sunday in Lent is quite the roller

coaster ride... [There is] tension in [the Gospel of] Mark, the highs and lows out of which Jesus declares that the kingdom of God is near.”

Glowing. When describing people, that term traditionally implies someone very happy and excited (or perhaps sunburned, but with the cloudy skies we have had this season, I am focusing on the happy definition). A woman who is pregnant is often described as glowing, having an inner joy.



picture from MMMS collection

A glowing fire is warm, giving off radiant heat. Glowing people, filled with joy or excitement, radiate positivity to those around them: when it is near, the glow is not contained, it is shared.

When Moses spoke with God on Mount Sinai, he came down and his face was glowing so much it scared the Israelites. When Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended upon Him - I bet He was glowing with holiness then too. Only instead of scaring the people with it, Jesus headed into the wilderness.

There, He showed us how to live once we receive the Spirit - living in the wildness of this crazy world with temptations presented to us, but faithful and thus teaching others by our words and example. And

when the time is right, stepping forward to proclaim the kingdom of God is near, to share the holy glow. Heaven knows, the world needs it!

In the time of Noah, the world got so sinful, so dark and cold, that God decided to wash away the sinfulness and use just the few faithful to renew the earth. It was a terrifying display of the awesome power of our Creator – and to remind us that despite having that power, God loves us too much to destroy everything with floods again, the Lord gave us *and every living creature* a covenant marked by rainbows.



picture from MMMS collection

The beauty of that holy glow brings wonder to all who see it even today, when we can explain the physics behind rainbows appearing in the sky. It is a reminder that even when – *especially* when – we go through storms in life, God is near for us.

I think far too often we forget that just because we can explain the “how” or even copy it on some scale, all of creation is still wondrous to behold, a reminder that God is near for us. I just wish we were better at taking care of the world and keeping the covenant as God intended for us to.

The psalmist knew people still sinned, and asked for

God's mercy and guidance for us to do better. The psalmist knew that the Lord was there to lead humble sinners on paths of steadfast love and faithfulness.

For the Old Testament Israelites, God's grace got them into the covenant, and their obedience to the law (as a joyful response) enabled them to stay in covenant with God. But as described in 1 Peter, it is Jesus' death and resurrection that enables us to be *and remain* in covenant with God.



picture from <https://www.pexels.com/photo/person-jumping-1830815/>;
credit: Alexandro David

Gone are the socially restricting limits of who may be in God's grace; Jesus saved even those thought to be unsavable, who died in sin before the Abrahamic covenant or the Mosaic law were established – of course Gentiles of all kinds are also included in Jesus' new covenant, without having to follow the Jewish law rituals.

For those who have faith in Jesus, baptism is not merely a washing away of sin but an act of recreation – rebirth – into new life full of the grace and mercy of the Almighty. We are transformed into something new and more beautiful than we realize, to live in love-based relationships instead of relying on transactions in an attempt to win God's favor.

So what do we do with this? First, repent anew of your sins – including those you inspired in others and those you unwittingly supported by silence or inaction. Seek the forgiveness of God and of one another, and be humble, for we probably do not even know how we have harmed one another.

An odd thing about being trapped in sin, is the one trapped is usually blind to the bonds of that sin. So listen when someone tries to explain how they are hurt and how we can do better. Let the Holy Spirit flood your soul, destroying & removing sinfulness and renewing & restoring life in the love of Jesus.



picture from

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/depts-of-love/first-sunday-in-lent-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/first-sunday-in-lent-year-b-graphics>

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news!” As we take our first breath in Christ, we are freed from bondage to sin and death to live more fully. The fire of God’s love kindles grace within us for sharing with the world. Proclaim Jesus with your life!

Let the glow of the Holy Spirit in our hearts radiate out to all we come near, that they may be warmed by the love of Christ and join God’s heavenly kingdom with us. Amen.