

# Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Violent insurrection. Deep divisions. Widespread unrest.

This is the world in 70 AD that Mark is writing his gospel in. He was writing during the Jewish-Roman war, when a group of Judeans rose up against the Roman empire, and tried to take back control of their towns.

When introducing Jesus to his readers in this passage, Mark makes sure to mention that Jesus came from Galilee. Theologian Ched Meyers says it is likely that Mark's readers would have known Galilee to be ground zero for many groups in the region rebelling against the Roman Empire, often using the same violence that they were trying to combat.<sup>1</sup>

Individuals in the Judean and Galilean countryside would have been approached by members of these groups, seeking their allegiance. Seeking their support for when the next violent clash would arrive at their city. Not only was there much bloodshed during this time, but communities were fractured. Perhaps even members of the same family were divided among these competing factions.

In light of the events of the past week and a half, it seems not too much has changed in the past 2000 years. About 10 days ago, on January 6<sup>th</sup>, It felt as if I was seeing our nation break open as I saw members of my own country breaking

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<sup>1</sup> Ched Meyers, *Binding the Strong Man: A political reading of Mark's story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2017) 87.

windows of the US capital, penetrating the walls of one of our most sacred symbols of this nation and of democracy. I was horrified for the congress people and scare capitol police who were fearing for their lives.

But at the same time, I couldn't help but remember the many US backed coups and insurrections around the world. I couldn't help but think about the \$900 billion dollars that we spend on military each year. As Pastor Jason mentioned last week, our nation has been marked by and known for its violence since its inception. While many of us sat shocked at what we saw happening at the capitol building, to anyone in a nation that has experienced a US backed intervention or Coup- it was no surprise at all.

As much as I would like to distance myself from the violence I saw on Jan 6, I also realize that as a citizen of this nation, I am not innocent.

There was a day last November that I realized how complicit I was. It was the Saturday after election day and my spouse and I just happened to be going for a walk downtown when we both got a ding on our cell phones. The major news channels were announcing. It was official- there was a clear winner of the 2020 Presidential Election. Within a few moments, hundreds of people gathered downtown to celebrate. In the middle of all the cheering and honking, an elderly disheveled and possibly home-less man humbly approached the celebratory crowd with a cup in his hand. He went from person to person asking "spare any change?" He was largely rejected and remained largely invisible to the crowd.

In that moment, I reflected: If Jesus were here, he wouldn't be in that crowd, he would be with that gentleman- asking for money, asking for a meal.

I had a sense of being part of a polarizing system that only made societal fractures deeper and messier as we are not truly listening, recognizing humanity, and responding to our neighbors in need.

It is into our violence-soaked, fractured societies- that of Galilee 2000 years ago and our own- that Mark offers an alternative to the competing factions and cycles of violence. He offers Jesus, starting with THIS scene of Jesus' baptism.

Jesus' baptism represented **a break** with other traditions and factions happening around him. Greek scholars point out that the verb used for Jesus's baptism indicates a full submersion, representing a complete repentance.<sup>2</sup> A complete break from the cycles of violence perpetrated if not by the Roman empire, by other groups popping up around him as well. He broke with the competition for power that always left out the poorest, the hungriest, and the most forgotten.

Jesus' identity revealed in baptism and throughout his ministry was also a **continuation**. With the holy spirit, that descended on him that moment, Jesus continued God's history of love and welcome in a very fractured world through his own acts of love, healing, and service.

In Jesus' story, Mark's audience who found themselves surrounded by war and invitations to violence, would see that there was another way. They too could break with the cycle of violence around them and in them, and they too could see the hypocrisy of all the factions vying for their allegiance. They could be completely transformed by the love of God and love of neighbor.

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<sup>2</sup> H. Waetjen, quoted in: Ched Meyers, *Binding the Strong Man: A political reading of Mark's story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2017) 129.

So too, At our baptism, we are called like Jesus to break with the sickest parts of ourselves and society and to join in God's work of love in this world.

In today's world, this means we must renounce the white supremacy that causes this nation to perpetrate violence upon Black Indigenous POC in this nation and abroad since its inception. We must break with and the white nationalism behind the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection. It means too that we must renounce the apathy and complacency that kept anyone from helping the homeless gentleman in downtown Chicago last November. And we must break with the pattern of silence that keeps us from speaking out and being courageous when a human sibling and neighbor is in need.

In baptism, not only do we renounce and break with evil, but also CONTINUE in the redeeming work in this world that God has already begun. We remember our baptism, and our calling to be born anew not only for our sake but for the sake of the world- continuing, together with the WHOLE CHURCH, to live out God's vision of justice for the least of these that are left behind by otherwise polarizing polemic and partisan politics.

On this third weekend of January, we commemorate Martin Luther King Jr. And we need his example more than ever. In his letter written from the Birmingham Jail, he shares how HE broke with the evil of racial inequality around HIM. He also describes the methodical approach that he used to overcoming cycles of violence, and of responding to the violence done to him using nonviolent resistance.

Responding to why he would take a stand against racial inequality with these methods, he says: “Injustice anywhere, is a threat to justice everywhere.”<sup>3</sup>

May Martin Luther King Jr.’s words ring in our ears today, Baptism of Our Lord Sunday, and this week as we remember our baptisms in our daily lives. May the events of this past week remind us of the cycles of violence we are called in our baptism to renounce. And May God guide us to the radical paths of peace and justice, following in Jesus’ steps. AMEN.

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., *A Letter from a Birmingham Jail*,  
[https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html)