

September 15, 2024  
Rev. Lisa Schrott  
Mark 1:4-15  
*Inside Out*

John the Baptizer appeared in the wild, preaching a baptism of life-change that leads to forgiveness of sins. People thronged to him from Judea and Jerusalem and, as they confessed their sins, were baptized by him in the Jordan River into a changed life. John wore a camel-hair habit, tied at the waist with a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild field honey.

As he preached he said, “The real action comes next: The star in this drama, to whom I’m a mere stagehand, will change your life. I’m baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. His baptism—a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit—will change you from the inside out.”

At this time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. The moment he came out of the water, he saw the sky split open and God’s Spirit, looking like a dove, come down on him. Along with the Spirit, a voice: “You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life.”

At once, this same Spirit pushed Jesus out into the wild. For forty wilderness days and nights he was tested by Satan. Wild animals were his companions, and angels took care of him.

After John was arrested, Jesus went to Galilee preaching the Message of God: “Time’s up! God’s kingdom is here. Change your life and believe the Message.” **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

It is a bit risky to open a sermon with words from the PC(USA) Book of Order... but here goes... “The good news of the Gospel is that the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—creates, redeems, sustains, rules, and transforms all things and all people.”<sup>1</sup> So opens the PC(USA) Book of Order. The very first sentence of our denominational guiding document opens with the actions of the triune God - the triune God, who is actively depicted in the baptism passage I shared from the Gospel of Mark. The triune god creates - God the Creator, redeems - the work and person of Jesus Christ; and sustains - the Holy Spirit who is with us always. And the triune God rules and transforms. The triune God is sovereign - rules over all of the domains of our life. And the triune God **transforms** all things and all people.

We heard John the Baptist declare it. He said that he, John, is baptizing people in the river,

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<sup>1</sup> F-1.01 God’s Mission Book of Order p1. The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Part II. Book of Order. 2019–2023. Office of the General Assembly; 2019.

turning their old life in for a kingdom life. And that the baptism from the one who comes after him - namely Jesus - will be a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit. It will change you from the inside out.

From the “inside out.” In the liturgy of baptism we celebrate this inner transformation: In the waters of baptism, we are buried with Christ in his death. From it we are raised to share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>2</sup> We echo these words in the Prayers of Confession and Promise of the Gospel each week. “Hear the sound of love poured out. If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. Everything old has passed away. Our story is known, our sin is forgiven, our life is made new. We are a new creation! Believe the good news.”

Why do we say this every week? Because it is hard for us to believe what seems like such a simple statement – that we are forgiven. That we are a new creation. That we are transformed - not on the surface, but deep down inside. As the creators of the Re-Shaped worship material share: “This is not mere cleansing with water on the outside, but an inside job. In our encounter with Jesus, **we will be changed**. John’s baptisms were coupled with confession—another way to describe inner work, inner acknowledgement of the need for change.”<sup>3</sup>

In scripture the act of confession and repentance consists of two aspects, turning away from sin that is causing a breach in a relationship and turning toward God so that one can engage in new thoughts or behaviors to repair or restore the breach. From a theological perspective in the Reformed tradition, we have John Calvin to thank for deepening our understanding of repentance. Calvin defines repentance as “departing from ourselves, we turn to God, and having taken off our former mind, we put on a new.”<sup>4</sup> Repentance is a process of transformation by which our old sinful self dies, and a new life arises.

And although Calvin was writing in the 1500’s, his language anticipates how contemporary neuroscience describes the way our brains are modified to allow new behavior to emerge, a concept known as neural or synaptic plasticity. From the moment our neurons begin assembling what will become the brain until brain function ceases when our earthly life ends, our brains have the capacity to be remodeled, reshaped and re-formed. Some of this plasticity is chemical in nature, some electrical, and some architectural – the actual cells and their connections change shape and size. Unused and unneeded connections are lost and new cells added. Calvin was on to something – we actually do take off our former mind and put on a new mind. We are transformed from the “inside out.”

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<sup>2</sup> Liturgy of Baptism. Thanksgiving Over the Water. *Book of Common Worship, PC(USA)*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2018., p411

<sup>3</sup> [www.worshipdesignstudio.com/reshaped](http://www.worshipdesignstudio.com/reshaped)

<sup>4</sup> Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Ed. John T. McNeill. 2 Vols. Library of Christian Classics. Westminster John Knox Press, 1960. I.XIII.14,138, III.III.1,592 and III.iii.5,597

The animated movie *Inside Out* – truly a magnificent depiction of our neural processing – uses a concept of “core memories” to explain how major moments in our lives shape who we are. In the film, “each core memory powers an island of [the protagonist] Riley’s personality and is vital in making her who she is. When she is young, Riley has 5 personality islands; family, friendship, goofball, hockey, and honesty islands. By the time the film ends, Riley is 12 and she now has dozens of personality islands including tragic vampire romance island, boy band island, and an improved friendship island with a friendly arguments section.”<sup>5</sup>

If you haven’t seen the movie (and the sequel) I won’t spoil it for you... I will encourage you to see it (and have plenty of tissues on hand) and share this tidbit. As Riley ages, her core memories become less of a single pure emotion and more of a combination of emotions. They become more nuanced as she deals with a world that far less black and white. As Riley is changed from the “inside out” the way she interacts with the world is changed. And this happens over and over and over again, as neural plasticity reshapes her brain and behavior.

Last week Rebecca shared the passage from Jeremiah that uses the metaphor of God shaping and reshaping us as a potter would shape and reshape clay. In our passage this morning we see how our neural plasticity is reshaped by the transformative act of baptism – turning our old life into a kingdom life. As the creators of the Re-Shaped worship material share: “... as we encounter the living Christ in everything around us ... we are invited into the kind of change that will bring about renewed spirit and vitality within us, and therefore, around us. ... Spiritual growth happens as we decide to “lean into” the kinds of change that will bring more health to ourselves, to our relationships, to our communities.”<sup>6</sup>

Masahisa Goi, the founder of the Peace Pole movement, leaned into the kind of change we are talking about - change from the “inside out”, change that brought more health to our communities, change that was transformative. Goi was born in Tokyo in 1916. As a young man, he loved the arts, literature and music and saw himself being fulfilled by serving as a musician or a teacher. However, a transformative event changed his life’s trajectory. After witnessing the devastation caused by World War II, and especially the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Goi dedicated himself to the pursuit of global peace. <sup>7</sup>

There are many ways one can pursue peace - through political means, through protest, through community organizing. Goi could have continued through his pursuits of art, music and literature. However, Goi’s pursuit of peace began - and continued throughout his life - through the transformation of his own spirit from the “inside out.” Goi dedicated himself to deep meditation and prayer. As I share in the words of preparation: Goi is quoted as saying,

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<sup>5</sup> <http://exhibits.usu.edu/exhibits/show/jenna/memories>

<sup>6</sup> [www.worshipdesignstudio.com/reshaped](http://www.worshipdesignstudio.com/reshaped)

<sup>7</sup> <https://worldpeace.org/founder/>

“To pray is, first of all, to let one’s mind be empty. It is to cast aside for a while “the self” that has existed until now, letting only God live in one’s heart.”<sup>8</sup>

Through this deep emptying of self, Goi gained insight into the nature of humankind. He was re-shaped and transformed and one day God revealed a message to him that propelled him forward in the work of re-formation and transformation of the world. He received the message “May Peace Prevail On Earth.” Goi believed that this message has the capacity to bring people of various cultures, faiths, and traditions together. In 1955, Goi initiated an international movement of prayer for world peace, which has since spread throughout the world to people of all ages, faiths, and walks of life. This movement is centered around the prayer “May Peace Prevail on Earth”. It began as small neighborhood gathering, which grew larger throughout Japan as the movement started to gain momentum. Supporters handed out literature and stickers in front of train stations and other public locations. Goi encouraged creative ways to carry the message to the public. In 1976, the idea of placing the peace message and prayer on poles began.

The first Peace Poles outside of Japan began to appear in towns and cities around the world in the early 1980's. By 1986, The Peace Pole Project was established in the United States followed by Peace Pole activities in Europe and throughout the world. At the end of our worship service we will re-dedicate the PCO Peace Pole. One of the things that is so striking about the PCO Peace Pole, is that recognizes the ministry of the laity in the mission of the church. It is in commemoration of the work of the Mission Committee, with the materials documenting the Peace Pole listing outreach ministries of the church and individuals and locations where they have served. Individuals who were re-shaped and transformed into a nature that is arching forward toward the image of God. Amen.

Jesus went to Galilee preaching the Message of God: “Time’s up! God’s kingdom is here. Change your life and believe the Message.” You are loved. You are a new creation. All are welcomed to the table to be transformed. Taste and see. And yet we live in a world that is broken, with bodies that decay, with relationships that splinter, and with reminders of how sin separates us from God and each other. We look around our world and in community and sometimes in our own lives and see the chaos – feel the pull of the deep abyss of divisiveness and ugly swirling winds of demagoguery. And it can feel like we will be forever mired in this muck. And yet, from the inside out, we are arching forward toward the image of God. The biblical story from creation to revelation is future-oriented: God will complete what God began. For us, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are signs and guarantees of God’s promise. They are assurances that God remains faithful to God’s redemptive purpose and plan. And that starts with each of one us, being transformed from the inside out by the power of the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who creates, redeems, sustains, rules, and transforms all things and all people. Join me in prayer.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://quotestats.com/topic/masahisa-goi-quotes/>