

January 8, 2017: The Great Invitation - Heavens Opened



This morning we move into our season of Epiphany – the brief season between Christmas and Lent when we leave mangers and swaddling clothes behind and turn to stories of revelation. Kings and stars. Doves and voices calling out from the heavens. We encounter Jesus interacting with John the Baptist, and those who he will call to follow him. We will hear him preaching on the mountainside and teaching the Pharisees. And we will see his glory revealed in the transfiguration on the mountaintop with his closest friends. The purpose of this season is to help us see once again who Jesus really is; to hear again, with fresh ears, the call to follow him and live into the Kingdom of God. We are called to remember and reflect on the beginning and developing stages of the spiritual journey we've undertaken and are actively inviting others to join us on. During this season's worship series, "The Great Invitation," we will look closely at the Old and New Testament scriptures in our lectionary and explore together what they reveal to us about Jesus and our own faith journeys. We will wrestle with who Jesus is for us, and who we are as his followers. We will also be looking beyond ourselves to see what discipleship looks like lived out in our everyday lives, and in our interactions with others. This will be a great series to invite a friend or neighbor to since we'll be talking about the basics – Jesus' call to "come and see" and to follow.

Our series opens today with the baptism of Jesus. After Matthew's introduction of John the Baptist's ministry of calling people to repentance and baptism, we hear these words, "Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him." There are many theological debates that rage on about why Jesus wanted to be baptized in the first place – if he was divine, Son of God in flesh, then what would Jesus need repentance from? This debate could be a sermon all by itself... but that's not where we're going to go today. What I'm drawn to is not the repentance and sin question, but rather, the importance and meaning of baptism in general, specifically for Jesus, but for each of us as well.

In our scripture, we hear that after John tries to say, "Oh, no, you should be baptizing me!", he gives in and performs the baptism... and as Jesus comes up out of the water, the heavens open and a dove descends. The dove alights on Jesus, and a voice from heaven calls, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." If we were to read on into the next chapter of Matthew, we'd hear that Jesus is immediately led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Only after these 40 days and 40 nights of fasting and prayer in the wilderness, does he come back to begin his ministry of preaching and teaching, healing and calling his disciples. For Jesus, this baptism that we read about today is the entry point of his ministry, it is where it all begins. While Christmas is certainly the celebration of his earthly birthday, his baptism is where he chooses to answer the call to ministry that God has put on his heart. It's when he says, here I am God, I'm yours, send me.

I wonder what comes to mind when you think of your baptism? Whether it has this same "starting line" feel, as it does in Jesus' story... I know that in my pre-baptism class with

first time parents, we talk a lot about God's prevenient grace that goes before us, surrounding our lives in the love of God even before we could know or understand it. We talk about the covenantal relationship that is formed between the baptized individual and God, and the relationship that is forged between the family and the worshipping community – upholding and supporting one another along this faith journey... but we rarely get into the "vocation" or "call to ministry" component of baptism. So often we baptize infants who can't speak for themselves, so we wait to have the "living out your faith" conversations until confirmation... and while that is ABSOLUTELY appropriate, it effectively separates these two intricately woven pieces into distinct units. Baptism is the initiation into the community of faith, and confirmation serves as the individual's YES! Here I am, send me!

In John and Jesus' day, these two components were one and the same, it was a both/and. In fact, it was probably more the second than the first, since the people going to be baptized by John were probably already Jewish. This was a time of repentance, a time to right the wrongs of your past and to turn your heart completely to God, changing your life and the way you live to reflect more of God's love. It was absolutely the YES! Here I am, send me! that we experience and celebrate at confirmation.

In our first scripture from Isaiah, I hear some of the language that goes along with this sense of rededication of life and heart. Isaiah speaks of God's choice of a person or persons to be God's messengers to the world. "I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness." This word righteousness comes up in both our Isaiah text and in Jesus' response to John as he asserts his desire to be baptized by him. He says, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Interpreters debate extensively the meaning of "to fulfill all righteousness," especially since the word righteousness carries numerous connotations about personal piety and the state of a person's "soul" but, righteousness also refers to God's saving action in the world. We can translate the Greek word for righteousness (dikaiosune) as justice. Righteousness encapsulates God's passionate commitment to set right the things that are wrong, both in our individual lives AND in society. In other words, righteousness is not only a matter of personal piety, but also a matter of social justice. It's a call to personal faith AND a life of faith in action. And this my friends, is what baptism in its wholeness is meant to be, righteousness of heart and faith, but also of life lived in the social world around us.

Baptism claims us as God's beloved children, initiates us into the community of faith, and marks us as standing with God, which means we stand against the voices that deny God's ordering of creation in the ways of justice and peace. Baptism, in a way, is our ordination to ministry, our vow to live with more concern for the hurting than for our own comfort, and our promise to take issue with ideas with which everyone else agrees. Baptism is the commitment to share our time with the poor and listen to the lonely. As Isaiah said, to be "a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness."

When we fall back on our baptism as a reminder of who we are and who God has claimed us to be, we need to remember that baptism is also about who others need us to be. To remember that baptism is about living life as the light of the world for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven here and now. Our baptisms demand that we struggle with what's right and what's wrong, what's important and what's not. You will often hear me say that our baptisms are not done after the water is sprinkled over a forehead... but it is something we live into the rest of our lives – and this is the righteousness I'm talking about. The righteousness of living into the Kingdom of God, and doing our part in helping it along.

Today, as we remember the Baptism of our Lord, and celebrate the initiation of his transformational ministry, we have the opportunity to remember and reaffirm our own baptismal covenants. This water which has already been prayed over and blessed during Owen's baptism is now for us the waters of renewal and remembrance. Today, after we bless the communion elements, you will be invited to come forward and touch these waters of baptism, making the sign of the cross on your forehead or hand, and remembering once again what it means that you are water washed and spirit born. That you have been claimed as a beloved child of God and called to live a life of righteousness and faith as you live out your baptism each and every day. So, come to the water -- water poured over and immersing us, water flowing freely for all who will receive it, water from the streams of God's saving power and justice, water that brings hope to all who thirst for righteousness, water that refreshes life, nurtures growth, and offers new birth.