

Sermon January 16 2022 Brent

SCRIPTURE: Luke 3:21-22

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

SERMON: "Moments of Joyful Opening" The Rev. Brent Damrow

There are stories in the Bible that I know. There are stories in the Bible that I, in fact, know by heart. And then don't we all know, there are stories in the Bible that we don't know, they just seem to live in our hearts. And this, for me, is one of those stories. In just a couple of brief verses, there is so much in this story that I love.

In all the gospels, there is this crazy guy, John, who has enough conviction and courage, enough something to get people to break out of their routine and leave it behind, and to go out into the desert seeking something better. The gospels will tell you everyone from Jerusalem went out. And what I love about this story is that Jesus is content to simply join them there. It is a story of the most profound individual experience in baptism, and the most profound communal experience of oneness.

There is physicality in this story. I imagine John touching Jesus. You can feel the water surround Jesus as he goes under and drip off his body as he comes up. And then, of course, the Spirit, that intangible, ineffable thing takes the form of a dove. And I still picture Jim trying to lower that dove from the sanctuary balcony that we did one time over here. How great would it be for the Spirit to become that tangible! In that story are the most profound human things and the most profound heavenly things, and God ripping it open to find us in the moment. Even before I left for my sabbatical, this passage is one that dwells on my heart.

I don't know about you, but as I've encountered this story and as I read about it in commentaries and other places, it seems to always be phrased as a starting point. The baptism of Jesus was a jumping off point. It was where Jesus' ministry started. It was from here that Jesus was drawn into the wilderness. It's a story of action. And yet I don't know if it was because of my own frame of mind, or whether because six times on my sabbatical this story came up for me in things I was reading and things people were saying. And every single time it was with the opposite meaning, not to look at this story as a jumping off point or a starting point, but rather as a stopping point, a pausing point, a breaking point, a letting everything go point, an absolute cessation of anything point. For Jesus to be in that moment, to have his belovedness be acknowledged alongside everyone else's. And to be opened into a bigger imagination of what could be.

The first time it came to me, I was a little confused and had to read it a couple of times. It's in that small book by Richard Rohr. The reason I was a little bit confused was that it was on my first afternoon in Big Sur, and I pulled up to this tiny cottage intent on doing so many things after riding the train over. And I said, well just for a moment I'm going to sit down on my bed, well

you know it's kind of comfy to lay down on my bed and maybe I'll read this book, and well for the next 3-1/2 hours or so I'm not sure if I was awake or asleep. But in the midst of it, Richard Rohr was the first person to say Stop, stay in this moment, don't go anywhere, because it only lasts for a blink of an eye. Stop.

The next morning the bells of the monastery woke me at 5:15 in the morning. The bells wake you every morning. You don't wear a watch, your cell phone doesn't work, and so the bells tell you where to go and when. I figured if the bells were ringing at 5:15, it probably meant I should be somewhere. So I got up and got dressed and sure enough, everyone was going to chapel. That morning, the brother who was leading worship said I don't know why, but this morning it suddenly came to me that I really wanted to talk to you about the baptism of Jesus. Now, I've had encounters with God in many ways before, but this seemed a little much. It was happening pretty quickly. And so I thought this may be a theme I should pay attention to.

On my time away, on all those walks, I took time to listen to authors on Audible. I don't know if that counts as reading or not. But I took time to listen to these authors that I don't normally get to listen to. And one of them is Cynthia Bourgeault, an ordained Anglican priest. She's part of the wisdom tradition of Jesus, and she wonders out loud how the world might have looked different if instead of Rome determining the way we would understand Jesus from the beginning, if that group of monastic thinkers would have shaped our vision of Jesus. I highly recommend her work. Her book "The Wisdom Jesus" is amazing and explains many things. But she too said when you get to this moment of Jesus' baptism, don't get stuck in those questions about does Jesus need to be healed of sin through baptism, what is he doing there, why does it matter. She says just be there and watch what it does to you.

The fourth time it came to me was in reading my familiar old friend Henri Nouwen, "In the Name of Jesus," where he riffs on this story too. But this time when I came back to an old story, I saw it with new eyes.

This moment in the River Jordan happens to Jesus once. For us, most of our baptisms happened when we were too young to remember them. Is there anyone here who remembers their baptism? God bless you! Hold onto it! Because it is such a treasured gift.

The next time I encountered the story was when Mary Luti wrote in her devotional that this is the most important story for the start of our new year, and that every moment we should hear that sound of God calling us beloved, whether we remember it as a kid or not. How different would every day be if we simply started remembering we were beloved.

I want to touch very briefly on the three questions that the congregation pondered and wrestled with during my sabbatical. I don't have a big banner beautifully drawn out, like the one the Sabbatical Committee displayed last Sunday. But there are a few things I do want to share with you. And really, it was this story of the baptism of Christ, which Holland led with last week, that really framed how I thought about a number of things.

To me, the reason of why we come to church is because it allows us to joyfully and seriously become the kin-dom of God. It allows us to simply be together in a joint quest for something that

demands all of us, and gives profoundly back. But that has to be done, it seems to me, in that idea of this very story. The opening, the miraculous, the always being open to something bigger. I remember when I first got here, saying to someone on the golf course that I think the purpose of religion is to always open us up to bigger questions. And yet I know in my time here it's so much easier to focus in and in and in on our particular situation until we're solving things, rather than opening ourselves to the mystery of God. So the first thing I want you to know from my sabbatical is I hope that you and I and all of us together can joyfully open to the amazing mystery of our faith.

Now if you keep reading this story in Luke's gospel, you will find that what everyone gathered there did is what I hope we will always do as a church. They said John, this is amazing. Now what do we do next when we go back? What do we do when we live? And so I hope in the part of becoming church is that we always and forever ask What do these big things inspire us to change, to become, to be, to cherish, to love – all of those things.

Secondly, what does it mean for us in our relationships? Have you ever spent time in silence in community? I had no idea what to expect. Ask my husband, I kind of freaked out. I read 17 different books about what I was supposed to do, until I got into my bed and just fell asleep, and then I realized, oh that's what I'm supposed to do. But the difference in being in a community of people over an extended period of time, is that silence brings us into contact with each other with no baggage. After chapel every morning I would walk the two miles down to the road (and by down I mean down), and then the two miles straight back up again. The first day I was somewhat relieved I could actually do it. But every day I would encounter the same people in the same way. They would leave five minutes after me or ten minutes before me, and we would pass each other on the way, and we would look at each other. We would smile, and we would share some gesture of silent greeting.

The interesting thing is, I didn't know their story and they didn't know mine. I didn't have the baggage of having to be anyone to them, nor they to me. But the amazing thing I also discovered in this journey was that it had the most profoundly positive experience. For some reason I always assumed the best of them. For some reason I always wanted the best for them. For some reason it uncomplicated things so that we just tried to support each other in making it through each day. In little gestures, in little movements.

And so I think about how it shows up in our relationship. We've been in church together a long time. We learn a lot about each other. Sometimes that's good, and sometimes, though, it leads to assumptions about each other that it would be better if we just let go. Because maybe you're in a new place in your journey, and maybe so am I.

We were bound together by certain rules, and yet we were free to become who we were and what we needed to do. And quite frankly, I think that's part of our job in church. How do we take the goodness of who Jesus calls us to be in how we treat each other, and how we love each other and forgive each other, and reconcile with each other, and yet make room for each person to be who they need to be, because we know that each person is made in the image of God.

The other thing I mentioned in my Children's Time today was pretty interesting. And sometime I'll share with you my scientific research! But in Big Sur (CA), in Alford (MA), in Stockbridge (MA), in Camden (ME), and in Vermont, it became part of my practice on my walks to wave to every person and every car who came by. Let's just say those communities have different responses! But what I noticed was that in Big Sur, part of that came from the fact that I didn't have contact with anybody else, so I wanted to make sure I had contact with each person I saw. And how it changed when I transferred that to everyone I saw.

Finally, how does that relate to our relationship to the bigger world? There are a couple of books that I encountered while I was gone. As part of a calling, I'm exploring doing some prison ministry. Not in place of this church ministry, but merely to make sure I'm always expanding beyond here. There were two books that I read. One was called "The Sum of Us," and the other was called "Just Mercy." I don't know if you've read either of those. But through those books, with the huge issues of dealing with race and racism and all of the baggage they claim, I came away profoundly and in conversations with my dad up in Camden, who is head of his Justice Committee at church, with this profound sense that I want to touch those that we touch. To spend my energy and focus, and I hope the church does, on touching those we touch here in the Berkshires. That doesn't mean ignoring the larger world, but making sure for those that we touch, that we actually touch in real ways, and we let them touch us, too. Remember, Jesus didn't just touch John in the baptism. John touched Jesus.

As I walked around on my walks, I saw so many needs and so many good things. In Alford, there were at every house, it seemed to me, rocks left out with beautiful messages. There were things encouraging you to take them with you. I walked past churches and places of ministry with signs that they were looking for help. And one of the things that struck me was that I hope that we as a church continue to do our amazing things in simple ways, and simply wonder how we connect with this world. Not to bring them into these doors necessarily, but to bring us out into contact with them.

I read The New York Times probably more that I should. David Brooks and others constantly lamented, while I was gone, about how mean the United States has become. How lousy we seem to be in treating one another. I think that this church can be the John the Baptist in the world, doing something so crazy, letting go of that rancor, letting go of that meanness, letting go of that and instead love our brothers and sisters. Come, let us simply love freely.

Friends, there is so much I want to tell you. But that's the starting point. I'm thankful that you engaged those questions while I was gone, and I look forward to deeper conversations about it. But for now, the three things I want you to remember is to open, open so wide; walk, get out there and meet one another; and then finally, touch who you can touch. If we can do that together, we won't just *be* church, we will be what our mission calls us to be, which is nothing short of the love of God.

Friends, it is great to be home.