

January 12th, 2020

Matthew 3:13-17 “And the Heavens Were Opened”

We didn't have Faith and Films this month, so let's do a little bit of Faith and Films work now. I want you to imagine the church year - starting with Advent and ending with “Christ the King” Sunday - as a movie. It's not a big blockbuster action flick. More like an artsy indie film that makes you do a little work to figure out what it's really all about. The first few scenes in this movie is all about waiting. Not “twiddle your thumbs” waiting, but a leaning forward, eyes peeled, scanning the horizon kind of waiting. It's a time of preparing ourselves for God acting in an exciting new way. It's not a nervous, anxious kind of waiting either. It's all about waiting with hope, love, joy and peace.

Then the scene switches over to a humble carpenter in this obscure backwoods part of the Roman Empire. An angel appears to him to encourage him to marry his pregnant girlfriend because the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. Then ... we finally get to see the birth! And we realize that *this* is what we've been waiting for. God is acting decisively in the birth of this little baby. But the birth of Jesus isn't without peril and drama. The magi who make such a pretty picture on our Christmas cards, bring in their wake a jealous, murderous king and it all leads to desperate refugees escaping bloodshed.

For the next scene change, you get to see the introduction of a new character. He comes out of the wilderness, dressed in rags, calling people to repentance and denouncing those who abuse power. He's John the Baptizer or “The Angel of the Desert” as our Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters call him. He's inviting people to be baptized as a sign of their repentance. And folks are coming out to the wilderness in droves to see him, which tells you something. John is a big deal. He's a game changer ... a *life* changer! Everyone thinks, “*Clearly* this guy has *got* to be the Messiah! But *he* says, “No, there is another one to come.” Then Jesus arrives. The last time we saw him, he was a vulnerable baby fleeing to Egypt with his family, but now he comes on the scene asking

for baptism. He and John argue about this. John says “You’ve got it all backwards! I’m the one who needs to be baptized by you!” But eventually he concedes and Jesus is baptized.

Good movie so far? I can see this as a Robert Zemeckis film ... *Forest Gump, Back to the Future, Castaway* ... which of course means you get an Alan Silvestri soundtrack and a 50/50 chance that Tom Hanks is going to be in there somewhere. This is why you need to come to Faith and Films. You start seeing the world as a movie screen. But ... we need to hit the pause button here with John the Baptizer, because we need to check in with the source material if we’re going to make sense of this scene. The cool thing is that we’ve got four gospels to work with. Cooler still, all four gospels include the story of Jesus being baptized which is a big deal. When all four gospel writers include a particular story, it shows you how important that story is in the big picture!

Bible scholars *cannot* leave things alone. They start asking questions like, “Hey, why is it that Mark, the earliest and most concise gospel, spends the *most* time on John the Baptist ... but John, the latest and most theologically dense gospel spends the *least* time on John the Baptist?” What’s going on? Well, the consensus among most scholars is that the gospel writers all want to make it clear that *Jesus* is the star of the show, *not* John. So why would that be an issue? Well, in that time and place, John was kind of a big deal on the “non-conventional rabbi” circuit. He was notorious in fact. All the right people didn’t like him. But it didn’t take long for Jesus to become the one who came into the spotlight. “Well sure, John the Baptizer was killed during Jesus’ ministry, so it’s no wonder Jesus became the hot new celebrity traveling preacher.” But the Gospel writers all wanted to make sure that anyone hearing about Jesus for the first time knew that it *wasn’t John’s death* that propelled Jesus into the spotlight. There was a clear and distinct transition between one and the other. How the transition takes place is what’s unusual, and Matthew, the gospel writer we have in front of us this morning, gives us the clearest picture. Of the four gospel writers, Matthew is the only one that has John raising an objection to baptizing

Jesus. Here's the question I want to put on the table this morning - If John's baptism was a sign of repentance ... why in the world did Jesus have to repent? What was his "sin?" Okay, now our movie just turned into a mystery.

Let's talk about what baptism means for us. We believe that baptism is a sacrament. When someone asks me what a sacrament is, I say the easiest way to remember is "sacrament" sounds like "sacred moment." It's what a church holds most sacred. Our call to worship this morning lays out the three sacraments that we in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) believe are the most important – Baptism, Communion and The Ministry of All People. For us, Baptism symbolizes the beginning of the journey of discipleship. We believe that at our baptism, we set aside our old life to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and are then empowered and enlightened to do ministry. When we say, "Yes" to baptism, we forfeit our excuses for our lack of courage. Yeah, but ... we all lack courage at different times in our lives ... even after we've been baptized. Fair enough. I understand that. But there's a difference between lapses in courage and actively entertaining fear. And when I say, "entertaining fear," I'm talking about the times when fear comes knocking on our door and we say, "Oh hey! Come on in! Want a snack? Some lemonade? Why don't you stay the night? Better yet, why don't you just move in? I've got a room waiting for you here!" Entertaining fear gives us the opportunity to cop out. So before anyone ever makes a decision to be baptized, we need to answer the question, "Are we really sure we want the gift of the Holy Spirit?"

In baptism we are united with Christ and his work. No problem there, that's a good thing. But wait a minute, when we're united with Christ, we live by a set of values that are out of step with those of the rest of the world. For some people it has meant facing ridicule. In extreme cases, it has even meant facing the possibility of death. It means standing with Christ to be a light for the world to see. It means working to draw people into permanent alignment with God. It means helping the blind to see the light. It means unshackling prisoners and showing them freedom.

So ... are we *really* sure that we want to be united with Christ and his work?

We believe that in baptism we are incorporated into the church ... into Christ's body on earth. Okay, that sounds good. But wait a minute, when we're incorporated into Christ's body that means we have a responsibility to that body. We need to re-think how we spend our time, our money and our gifts. We are now *accountable* to that body. We lose a little bit of that autonomy that we cherish so much. Are we *really* sure that we want to be incorporated into Christ's body on earth?

We believe that in baptism we receive forgiveness for sins. Cool! I'm all about that! But wait a minute, when we receive forgiveness for sins it means that we also receive a better, sharper understanding of what sin is. It means we have to do some self-examination. See, I like to think of myself as a good person, but sometimes I'm shocked at the thoughts that come into my mind. Forgiveness of sin means that we acknowledge our ongoing need for reconciliation with God and with others. So are we *really* sure that we want to receive forgiveness of sin?

We believe that in baptism we are given new birth. Oh hey ... that's great! Born again! That's a good thing too, right? But wait a minute, when we're given *new* birth, it means there's a death to our old selves. It means seeking the face of God in the big and small decisions of life. It means putting the welfare of others before our own. It means putting our feet into the footsteps of Jesus. Are we *really* sure that we want to be given new birth?

Oscar Romero was a bishop in El Salvador who was shot to death in 1980 in his own church as he administered Communion. I think he had a solid understanding of what baptism was all about. He wrote:

If some day they take the radio station away from us, if they close down our newspaper, if they don't let us speak, if they kill all the priests and the bishop too, and you are left, a people without

priests ... each one of you must be God's microphone. Each one of you must be a messenger, a prophet. The church will always exist as long as there is one baptized person. And that one baptized person who is left in the world is responsible for holding aloft the banner of God's truth and of divine justice.

Taking all of that into account, do we *really* want baptism? Let's do a little sneak peek ahead in our movie. Let's go to Easter. On Easter, many Christians renew their baptismal vows. We promise to put our trust in God's help. We promise to continue in the community of faith, we celebrate the breaking of bread and we commit ourselves to prayer. We promise that we will proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ, that we will seek Christ in all people, and love our neighbors as ourselves. We pledge to work for justice and peace, and respect the dignity of *every* human being. And we do this because it's so easy to lose focus.

So back to our question. Why was Jesus baptized? Jesus was baptized to transform the very nature and purpose of baptism ... from one of not just repentance ... but of receiving the Holy Spirit to equip us all for the ministry that Jesus calls us to do. John wanted to know why Jesus felt a need to be baptized for the repentance of sins. What he discovered was that Jesus was baptized to receive the Spirit that gave him the clarity, the focus, and the strength he needed to stay the course from beginning to end. As we move into the next scene ... or should I say the next *season* in our church year, let us consider how we can lay claim to that same Spirit.