

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives somehow, by the movement and energy of your Spirit be a reflection or perhaps a glimmer of your light O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordon River and unlike the way we practice baptism here at Highlands and in much of the Christian church, it was a full immersion thing. He went right under the water and when he emerged from the water, that is when the blessing was heard.

Which, as you might imagine, has become a point of great debate around baptism ever since.

A Baptist and a Catholic were engaged in that very debate about the different ways their churches baptized people: total immersion or just pouring the water over the head.

The Catholic said, "Well, just how much water do you need? Knee deep?"

-- "No, more than that."

"Waist deep?"

-- "More."

"Up to the chin?"

-- "You need more water than that!"

"Over the head?"

-- "Yes, that's right."

"There you go. That's where we put it!"

"And at that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordon. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens being torn apart and the Spirit descended on him like a dove..." And I don't think the amount of water or the method of baptism really mattered to him but he heard something that we all long to hear, and that really did matter on the day and likely for the rest of his life. "You are my beloved, in you I am well pleased." There is the kickoff, according to Luke, of the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth- the beginning of the good news. The heavens are opened,

there is a voice of blessing. The separation of the realms is over; heaven/earth, humanity/divinity it all becomes one in this moment, and in it God's incredible blessing, pleasure, love for Jesus, humanity, the creation is expressed. That is some kickoff to ministry, eh? God's inaugural message: I am with you; I am for you; I love you.

A friend of mine shared a Rob Bell clip with me a while back. Rob Bell was the founding pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church until he found himself at odds with some of his more conservative evangelical brothers and sisters. Rob had grown increasingly frustrated with a common Christian message which called for certainty when in his experience, doubt is such a powerful gift in life and faith. He could no longer support a Christian message that was so focused on going to heaven someday (what he calls evacuation theology) when in his view God is all about loving and bringing that love and light into this life, here and now. Here is what Rob Bell had to say to Oprah Winfrey about this God whose inaugural message to Jesus was "I am with you. And I love you."

*Rob Bell Clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBXj2kyYAEM>

I wonder how it would change things if every day we got up in the morning to the divine voice saying, "I am with you. I am for you." Today, I want your life to flourish. Imagine if that became for us, the core message to ourselves every day, to our children every day, in our work every day, in our interactions, marriages, politics, everything. Because that is the message given at Jesus' baptism, it is the message that the prophet Isaiah was trying to get across to the beleaguered exiles, and I believe that is the message that is deep at the heart of the universe. It is written in the stars. Can you see it? And I believe that that message is at the root of the Christian faith and the good news of Jesus. It is the light of Christ in verbal form.

Now I must admit, I don't always live from that place. In fact, that is not the message I have received from lots of places in my life. Growing up in an absolutely

blessed home, I still haven't always believed it. Life has many harsher messages for us—messages that we are actually not enough: not good enough, not bright enough, not skinny enough or strong enough, not pretty enough, not cool enough, rich enough... I have been privileged to have 5 children in my life to watch grow through childhood and youth and I am continuously astonished at the harsh messages they have to contend with at school or in the community, among their peers. It can be heartbreaking to watch a child internalize the message that they are not enough, when you know that they are precious and beautiful and so very much enough.

But you see the trouble is, none of us as far as I know, have had the heavens open and the dove descend, and the blessed voice heard. And so how can we be sure? How can we be certain?

Parker Palmer is a wise teacher with deep roots in the Quaker tradition. Colleen is leading a book study of one of his books starting this week. Palmer talks about listening to the wisdom of the heart. He has practiced and taught this kind of deep listening throughout his life, and I think this wisdom of the heart is the place where God speaks that message. The heavens may not open and we may not get an external word from on high, but Palmer claims that a message is available to us if we can develop a practice of listening deeply to the wisdom of the heart, we find ourselves in a very vulnerable place but a divine place, and if we can live from the integrity of that place— the truth of it, and bring that solid grounding into what we do in the world, it changes everything for us, and he believes it can change the world.

He quotes Terry Tempest Williams who said, “The heart is the path to wisdom because it dares to be vulnerable in the presence of power.” Palmer says, “the wisdom of the heart tells us that you are worthy, you are precious, you are of profound value as you stand as a human being.”

Palmer points to all the great movements for social change in history, and he says they were forged from someone or some group connecting to the profound wisdom of the heart, and listening there (think Gandhi, think MLJ jr., think Malala Yousafzai, think about people whose wisdom and integrity and capacity to hold to their truth you admire). “The heart is the place where we learn what is worth living for, and therefore what is worth dying for.” He believe that every one of us has a heart wisdom and the world needs us to grow our capacity to live true to that in the face of a world that can so often be hostile to that deep wisdom. He says in the end, what will matter to every one of us is our answer to the question, “was I fully present in the world with the truth and integrity and identity I was given as much as humanly possible?”

Which brings me back to our Epiphany theme, God’s Constellation. Jesus heard the voice, and I like to think perhaps he heard it in his heart because that is actually how the rest of us hear it too. You are my beloved. I am with you. I am for you. You are enough. And that becomes the spark, the light, and the source from which he does everything else. And you, and I are called to listen as well, to practice listening to the wisdom of the heart so that we too can live from that place, shine from that place, join together from that place, draw others to that place of light and wisdom to form together a constellation on this earth of the light of God.

Let us pray. Gracious God, thank you for this life you have given us. It is so precious and wondrous. Thank you for blessing this life and weaving your very self into it. There are so many times when we struggle to discern you in it, discern what is authentic and true for us in it. In times of joy and in times of sorrow, in times of chaos and in times of order, we long to be in touch with your deep and abiding wisdom, your message of love and blessing. Take us as we are. guide us in the vulnerable and beautiful wisdom of the heart. Help us to live with the uncertainty of our time, and trust in you always. Amen