



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FEAST OF THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD, JANUARY 7, 2018
GENESIS 1:1-5; PSALM 29; ACTS 19:1-7; MARK 1:4-11

HEAVEN'S DELIGHT



***Mark 1: 4-11** [John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."]*

Last November Kathy and I spent a few days at a monastery south of Big Sur in California in silent retreat. The New Camaldoli Hermitage is situated on the side of a hill looking west onto the expanse of ocean that stretches to heaven's

horizon. The Santa Lucia mountains slide into the sea in this holy place that is serenely quiet and contemplative, and the monks there have struck a rhythm of prayerful presence that invites the visitor to stop and breathe.

The meandering highway hugs the coastline down from Monterey, until a slight turn up the mountainside accords into a series of switchbacks that deposit the retreatant onto a perch which presents the magnificent sky as a dome of blessing. The sound of stillness is broken only by the chirps of birds dancing about, and the tolling of a bell calling us to prayer four times each day, the first and last of which in November are in darkness, which only serves to heighten the senses.

There on the hillside, with flat water below, and the curved sky leaning down to meet it, with little ambient light, dilated pupils, and a new moon's disinterest, the sky's dark dome opened its portals wide to reveal a starry host so brilliant that it required nothing less than one's breath at first sight, before inviting several long inhales of ecstatic awe at the magnificent gift. Heaven's delight became mine to share, each evening and each morning, as I made my way to the chapel to praise God with all my heart and soul and mind and strength, and to listen in the silence of retreat.

I suspect you've all had similar experiences with the sky's mysterious and provocative beauty. I think all humans throughout the ages have looked to the heavens for inspiration. Even as we've come to view the universe through the lens of modern astronomy, we still find a full moon or streaking meteorite or twinkling constellation precious enough to take our breath away.

There is something seated deeply in our spirits that draws our gaze heavenward in ponderous connection. Perhaps the fact that we are human—that is, humus of the earth, which is stardust laid down here as galactic substrate primed for life, our island home orbiting a star whose mass bends us to its warm and weighty fire—perhaps that is connection enough.

We need not hold fast to some antiquated religious notion that God as gray beard dwells up there, in the clouds, to retain some sense of profound mystery and connected hope that the heavens might just whisper their wisdom in our direction if we will tilt the ear just right, and wait. Only you will know if it is divine wisdom when it comes to you, but this much I know is true—it takes patience to listen for silence to unfurl her

throaty voice of truth, and it takes a resolute practice of presence to let the clanging noise of life's dross fall away, and hear the voice of heaven delighting in you.

It is hard work, this holy listening, and I will be the first to admit how feebly impatient and ineffectual I am much of the time, filling the space with all sorts of busy-ness that creates a humming drone of deafening distraction. Impatience operates in an economy of metered time, calculated as a commodity, tick-tock, tick-tock, and there is no silence to be found in the impatient moment looking all around for a precious word.

When Jesus comes out of the water at his baptism, there is no sense of rushing, there is only presence, a holy moment, freeze-framed for us to see and hear, as bystanders at river's edge, that the heaven's delight is shared with this man. In all the gospels, Jesus never seems to be rushing to the next thing, but rather stands in the present moment with whomever else saw fit to stop and touch and be touched by this man's aura of wisdom and grace.

I think this is why we baptize still—it is rite and ritual to mark time differently, to remind us of our connected reality, try as we might to convince ourselves that we can do it on our own. That we baptize in Christ's name invites us to lean into the legacy of his baptism, that we might hear the divine words of delight for us as well, as beloved children of God. We form community here, called out of primordial waters of mythic power into a vocation of cosmic design, of which each of us has a small part. A vocation which bears Christ's name would not waver smaller scope, and through it we are connected to the whole, and to each other.

It was December 24, 1968, approaching fifty trips around the sun now, when astronaut Bill Anders readied his camera as the Apollo 8 lunar module eased out of the moon's shadow to see the Earth rising on the horizon. The green hues of continent pushing back azure blue oceans, topped with swirls of clouds, silently spun on its axis of connection with the sun that cast light on the earth in a dawn of new awareness, for Anders and all of us. His infamous photo, dubbed Earthrise, is still considered by many the most influential photograph in history, because it

offered us a new perspective. It still does. Heaven and earth were brought a bit closer together that day, as were all who live and move and have our being on this fragile earth our island home.

So, in this season that hinges on epiphanies, look to the heavens, and know that you are not alone in this journey. Know that you are part of a community that journeys together. Know that you are stardust, and to stardust shall you return, connected to the whole.

And know that this Jesus, arising from the river at his baptism, this Jesus, whom we call Christ,

has shown us the way to lift an ear toward heaven, and listen for a holy word with which you can work, and which will work on you, if you will let it.

Shhh. Listen.

Photo credit: NASA.

<http://www.spaceflightinsider.com/space-flight-history/apollo-astronaut-shares-story-nasas-earthrise-photo/>



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