



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

CANADIAN MEMORIAL CHURCH
& CENTRE FOR PEACE

Sermon Preached By Bruce Sanguin

Matthew 3: 13-17

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1st Sunday after Epiphany

“Opening to the Opening of the Heavens”

There was controversy in the early church over Jesus’ decision to submit to the baptism of John. Some scholars believe that John the Baptist was actually more popular with the people than Jesus in his day. It’s clear that Jesus respected John’s ministry. After all, he showed up, along with the rest of the crowds, to be baptized by John. When Herod murdered John, Jesus promptly returned from up north and took up John’s mantle. This was a source, perhaps, of some embarrassment for the early followers of Jesus. Did Jesus see himself as a disciple of John? So, the writers of the gospels make it abundantly clear that John thinks that he should be the one being baptized by Jesus, not the reverse.

But I don’t think anybody needs to be embarrassed by Jesus’ choice to submit to the baptism of John. As a human being, baptism was a sign that he was opening to the Spirit of God. The key part of the story of Jesus’ baptism is what happens afterward. “Just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending upon him like a dove and alighting on him” (Matthew 3:16).

In recent years, baptism has become more of a family tradition than an opening of the baptized to the

Spirit of God – something you do because your family has always done it. There’s nothing wrong with family traditions. We live in an age when there are precious few traditional rituals to connect us to our roots. But baptism doesn’t take on its full meaning and significance until we connect what we’re doing with this metaphor of the heavens opening and the Spirit of God descending like a dove.

Every religion teaches that we have a lower and a higher nature. The lower nature is our evolutionary self. By the time evolution arrived at homo sapiens sapiens, the creatures who knew that they knew, we had developed sensitive enough hardware in our nervous system to tune into a spiritual dimension of the universe – the divine heart and mind out of which the universe came into being. Because our lower natures came out of this divine milieu, we have an in-built desire to reconnect with the Source. This means for one thing that our lower nature is not bad. God declared all of creation to be good. It’s not fallen. It is relatively young measured by evolutionary standards. It doesn’t need to be redeemed. Rather, it needs to be reunited with its higher nature.

We find ourselves to be in a state of yearning. Without our higher

nature, we are lost and seeking this reunion in all manner of ways. This seeking can be misguided, trying to find the eternal in what is temporal, and the absolute in what is limited. In this process we go down blind alleys and take wrong turns. We act foolishly. What we need is to be consciously reunited with our higher nature, which is God or the Spirit.

When the heavens open after Jesus baptism and the Spirit of God descends upon him like a dove, this is an image of the spiritual reunion of his lower nature with his God nature. Jesus submits to John's baptism, the story says, in order "fulfill all righteousness". In other words, he does it to make things right, to declare himself to be a whole, spiritual being. Again, please don't hear in what I'm saying any kind of denigration of our lower or evolutionary selves. Evolution itself is a manifestation of Spirit in my theological model. We're not certain, but it may be that what is unique about human beings is that we have gained the capacity to consciously connect with our Source – to make things right – and act in accordance with this righteousness. We have the capacity to transcend, yet include and celebrate, our biological nature.

When we metaphorically follow Jesus into the baptismal waters the heavens open and our foolishness is replaced by spiritual wisdom – the heart and mind of Christ. As *we* open, the heavens open. That is, the spiritual realm becomes more and more available to us. Our capacity to manifest the Spirit in our lives

increases. At his baptism Jesus chose to open his natural self – already good and blessed – to an increased portion of the Spirit. Interestingly, this is precisely what the Jewish prophet Elisha had done centuries before when his master Elijah was dying. At the very spot where Jesus was baptized – by the river Jordan – Elisha, the student, used his freedom to ask for a double portion of his master's spirit. It is quite likely that Jesus set his own baptism in the context of this story.

Similarly, as Christians we can think about baptism as receiving a double portion of the spirit of the Christ, which is the Holy Spirit. This Spirit empowers us to take up Jesus' ministry, as he took up John's ministry – to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to help the lame to walk, to have a heart for the left-behinds, to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and our neighbour as ourselves. We grow in our capacity to "fulfill all righteousness"; to speak truth to power when necessary; to return violence with love; and to engage in senseless acts of forgiveness. While our lower natures are good, our higher nature – animated by a double portion of the Spirit of Christ – enable us to do magnify this goodness into what some might even consider to be "unnatural" – choosing to serve dinner to the homeless on a Friday evening rather than relax after a long, hard week; ignoring the siren call of society to accumulate ever more wealth, just because you want to serve the world in some way; opening ourselves to the suffering of the world, when it's

possible for us in North America to live in a bubble of materialism.

When Mary utters those immortal words, “My soul magnifies the Lord”, she speaks from an awareness of her higher purpose. She’s not merely having another child, in response to a biological urge – a good thing in and of itself. She is magnifying the presence of God in and through this child. In the model of baptism that is about family tradition, the baptism is focused around magnifying the child. But in the model of baptism that is about the heavens opening, the focus shifts to how the child “magnifies the Lord.” The whole baptism becomes sacramental – both a sign that points to the presence of the Holy One and a medium of grace, by which we who participate are brought into God’s presence.

A story is told of a chaplain in an American University receiving a phone call from an irate father of a student. The chaplain returned the phone call to see what was the matter. The father of the student wanted to know what kind of religious instruction he was giving his daughter.

“What’s the problem?” the chaplain inquired.

The father proceeded, “Well, she’s talking about going to Haiti to work in a slum and serve the poor. I put my daughter through university so that she could get a good job and support herself in the real world.”

The chaplain asked the man what about his church affiliation. “I’m a Presbyterian”, the man said proudly. “And have been all my life.”

The chaplain asked, “And you chose to have your daughter baptized, I presume?”

“Of course”, the father responded.

“Then I’m afraid I can take no responsibility for your daughter’s behaviour”, the chaplain concluded.

And here he thought that baptism was just an innocent family ritual. A dove landed upon that little girl at her baptism. And the rest of her life was to be about living into that baptism. She was merely “fulfilling all righteousness” – making things right between her and God, and making things right in the world. Friends, remember your baptism and be grateful.