

Sermon – January 15, 2023
“Suddenly the heavens were opened to him”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Matthew 3:13-17

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill our open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for your people that continues to transform us into Christ's image and guides us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Amen

Happy New Year! How are those resolutions going? Let me encourage us to continue to read the Covenant Renewal that was in the bulletin two weeks ago and let the guidance found there lead us to lasting change and continued growth into the image of Christ throughout 2023. Also, let me encourage each of us to read God's Word this year. Seek to read scripture. We can read the text that we will be looking at during the service each week, we can read the Gospels, we can read the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament), we can read and sing the psalms, or we can commit to reading the entire Bible this year. Let me encourage us to find new ways to read scripture together such as joining a Bible study, inviting our neighbors to our home to read scripture and share what they are hearing, or sit alone in the quiet and feast on God's Word. I would like to thank Judy Mooers for filling in last week while Kay and I enjoyed time with our family and got to be with our grandchildren.

We have moved forward in the life of Jesus from the visit of wise men and now find ourselves standing at the Jordan River witnessing the interaction of Jesus and John the Baptist as grown men. During Advent we spent several weeks with John the Baptist and the idea of his being one who was preparing the way for the one to come, the Messiah, the chosen one of God. This morning we are standing on the bank of the Jordan River watching John baptize people for the repentance of sin in the waters of the Jordan, and we see Jesus step down into the water and present himself to John for baptism. Don't miss that Matthew again tells us that John is at the Jordan River. Matthew is connecting this moment in Jesus' ministry to the time when Joshua led Israel through the waters of the Jordan and into the Promised Land. Jesus also will come up out of the same waters of the Jordan to lead all of God's people into the eternal promised land through his messianic ministry. This is the beginning of that ministry, a beginning that again starts with one coming up out of the waters of the Jordan.

We know that Jesus is the perfect Lamb of God. He is without sin. As we watch Jesus step into the water of the Jordan, we might find ourselves asking, "Why does Jesus come for baptism? What need does Jesus have for repentance? Why would Jesus have submitted to the baptism of water when he is the one John has told us will baptize with water and fire?" We hear in John's response to Jesus' request to be baptized, John's own concern over baptizing Jesus and John's own questioning as he seeks to decline to baptize Jesus, telling him, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"ⁱ Jesus' response to John begins to give us insight into why Jesus has come, that for now they may fulfill all righteousness, that the Law may be fulfilled. Jesus is seeking to fully obey the Father, to bring about the Father's will on earth as it is in heaven. But there is more for us who will come to belief in Jesus here at his baptism than Jesus fulfilling the Law. Jesus is also seeking to provide a consecration of baptism for us. He is establishing by his own submission to baptism a common experience for believers, an experience we will have with him as we also enter the water of our baptism. Jesus is giving us the sacrament of baptism, an outward sign of inward grace. The water of our baptism becomes a connection to Jesus. We can remember the sounds of the water, the wetness that poured over us, the water dripping from us, the smell of wetness all around us, and other physical aspects of baptism that may have lodged in our memories. We should also realize that Jesus does not have a need for the baptism of repentance, but receives baptism as a servant for the sake of others. John will write in his Gospel that Jesus comes in water and blood. The water of baptism marks the beginning of

Jesus' messianic ministry and his blood shed on the cross marks the end, the completion of that ministry with atonement of God's people.ⁱⁱ Augustine states in his writing about Jesus' baptism that, "baptism found in Him nothing to wash away, as death found in Him nothing to punish Both baptism and death were submitted to by Him not through a pitiable necessity, but of His own free pity for us." By this revelation, the water of baptism became set aside and consecrated to a special purpose—to bring the cleansing power of the Spirit to humanity.ⁱⁱⁱ

Baptism is also our beginning as a child of God, our entry into the Church with a capital C and our adoption into the family of God. It is our entry into a new covenant, not a covenant written on stones and marked by the sacrifice of animals, but a new covenant written on our hearts, hearts that are turned from stone to flesh by the power of Holy Spirit. Hearts, that through the power of Holy Spirit, can keep the requirements of the new covenant. Hearts that are again turned to God. Hearts that live in, by, and through grace.

Many of us present will have been baptized as children or as infants and have come to faith in Jesus later in life. Many of us may remember standing before a local congregation and professing our own belief in Jesus at a service that followed our time in a confirmation class or time of instruction about God, grace, and faith. We also have become those who in response to the baptism of an infant, child, or adult have sought to order our lives to help those baptized mature to faith and grow in sanctification into the image of Jesus.

Don't miss that in the second part of this morning's scripture, the Spirit of God descends like a dove and alights on Jesus. This is Holy Spirit being given to Jesus, and in baptism, through the laying on of hands, we also received Holy Spirit and are sealed by God as an adopted son or daughter. Jesus is not adopted by God but is declared God's Son, one with whom God is well pleased. Throughout our lives, we will receive fresh outpourings of Holy Spirit as we open our hearts more fully to God and seek to grow into the image of Christ.

I was baptized as an infant and confirmed when I was a senior in high school at the First United Methodist Church in Princeton, West Virginia. I did not keep the covenant, but returned to faith later in RFK stadium at a Promise Keepers event. I don't remember being baptized in that same church in Princeton, West Virginia as a few months-old infant. But I know I was because I have a fuzzy picture of myself in a long white gown sitting in a green chair, a picture that was taken on the day of my baptism. I cannot remember my baptism as I was too young, but I do remember through the witness of the people of that church and those in other places who

ordered their own lives that I might grow in faith. I don't remember my baptism, but I remember that I was baptized. I was not faithful to the covenant, but God through Christ was and is steadfast in keeping the covenant and with grace has invited me into the new covenant. This morning, we will take time to remember that we also were baptized. We will take time in our worship service to recall that we like Jesus have entered the waters of baptism and been redeemed by the blood of Jesus. As we come again to the waters of baptism this morning, we come not to be rebaptized, something that is not necessary as God is steadfast and is ever faithful in upholding God's part of the covenant. We come this morning in response to an invitation to come to the water again, to stir the water, to make the sign of the cross on our foreheads with water, to refresh our memories that we were baptized by placing the water on our faces, heads, or hands. Let us now prepare our hearts to remember that we have been baptized and are now sons and daughters of the King. As we stir the water this morning, remember that we have grown in faith from the time of our baptism into a deeper faith in Jesus and are seeking to grow into his image, the image of the beloved Son of God.

Pray with me and we will move into a time of remembering that we were baptized: Father, help us to be those who remember the saints of your Church who have shone the steadfast love of God into our lives. Lord, flood our minds with memories of those who ordered their lives and shone your love into our lives. Lord, open our hearts to be guided by Holy Spirit that we too might order our lives to shine your love into the lives of those in this congregation and community so that they may come to and grow in faith in Jesus. Jesus, help us to become those who will bear your steadfast love joyfully to others now and always. Amen

ⁱ NRSV Matthew 3:13-27

ⁱⁱ Oden, Thomas C.. *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* . HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

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