

Touch and see. Look and hear. Something astounding has happened. God has done a new and surprising thing. It all begins, and begins again in water, the Spirit of God, and the word spoken by the voice. As when the Spirit of God moved over the face of the waters, and the voice of God spoke creation into being and order. (Gen 1:1-3) As when the dove was a sign of deliverance to Noah, when the waters of the flood had receded, and creation was restored. (Gen. 8:8-12) As when the voice commanded Moses to lift up his rod and divide the waters of the sea, so that the people could pass through on dry land, out of slavery into new life. (Ex. 14:16)

What begins is God's new relationship with human beings in Jesus. It all began anew, that day at the Jordan, in water, the Spirit, and the word, when Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him.

John's was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. What is repentance but the admission that we have turned away from God, that we have wronged our neighbors and ourselves. That we have sinned and need the healing of forgiveness, to be restored to right relationship with God, neighbor and self. Repentance is a vulnerable posture to put oneself in, standing empty-handed, without defense or excuse.

Sadly, this is not something we witness often, if at all, in public life today. Not that there aren't wrongs being done, in public and in private, by institutions and by individuals. Not that those wrongs go undiscovered, or even unpunished, at least some of them. It's just that, as a society, we seem to have lost the will or the taste for admitting the truth when we have done injury, and have lost with it the sweetness of relationships healed by real repentance and forgiveness.

Jesus had no sin, did no wrong. He was in right relationship with God and his neighbors, a relationship of reverence and self-giving love. He did not need repentance or forgiveness. But there he came, into the thick of the crowd, not holding himself apart because he was innocent and sinless. Instead, he went, as one of us, under the waters of baptism. He said *that* was fulfilling all righteousness.

The Spirit, descending as a dove, anointed him. The voice from heaven affirmed, announcing, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." This is the beginning, by water, Spirit and word. This is Jesus' first public act. This the beginning of his mission to fulfill all righteousness by making present among us the peace and justice of the kingdom of heaven. This is the beginning of his mission to reconcile us to God, opening the way into new relationship with God in him, by being with us as we are so that we can become like him.

This is a new beginning. But it's not as if God had not been present with people before, or as if people had not been surprised by God before. In fact, it seems as if God has been forever up to something new, to pull us out of our preoccupation with ourselves,

bring us back from turning away from God and against one another. Being in faithful, intentional relationship with God turns out to be an ongoing process of transformation. Over and over again, we are presented with some new, unexpected understanding—some new epiphany, if you will.

Just look at John the Baptist. There he was, doing what he was sent by God to do to prepare the way of the Lord. He knew something about righteousness, being in right relationship with God and man; it was his whole life. But Jesus threw him for a loop.

For John, righteousness would have required that he, John, be baptized by Jesus, the Messiah of God. But faced with Jesus, John had to refigure his notion of God and God's will. Already at the Jordan, Jesus was showing that he would not accomplish God's will by wielding power or presuming on his status, but in his humility and weakness. How perplexing this still can be; how *not* the way we would expect God or the Son of God to act. And how unnerving when we realize that being his disciple commits us to act in the same way!

The exchange between John and Jesus about the baptism occurs only in the Gospel according to Matthew. Perhaps there was an issue in Matthew's community about what is righteous and what is not; or whether religious tradition is given and settled, or there still is room for God to be doing something new. Because as Matthew tells the good news, John, like Joseph, was a righteous man who had to make room for a new understanding of righteousness. Joseph took Mary as his wife, when she was already with child. John accepted that he must baptize the Son of God. Something new was beginning in God's relationship with human beings, in water poured by John's trembling hands, the Spirit alighting on Jesus, the affirming word from above.

Or look at Peter, in the passage from the Book of Acts. All his expectations and understanding of righteousness have been turned upside down when we see him this morning. After a lifetime of observing dietary laws about what a Jew could and could not eat—what was clean and unclean—he's had a vision and heard a voice tell to him that God has made *all* foods ritually clean and pure. (Acts 10:11-16)

Then he was sent to the house of Cornelius, a Roman centurion who worshiped God, but whose house Peter, a Jew, could not have visited because Cornelius was a Gentile. (10:28) It is there, before Cornelius and all his household, that we heard Peter share his new understanding that "in every nation, anyone who fears [God] and does what is right is acceptable to him." Now all *people*, like all *foods*, are finally understood to be accepted and included in God's sight—and so also in ours—because of what God has done in Jesus.

Even as Peter was speaking, "the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word." Peter and his companions were "astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles" (10:45). "Can anyone forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" Peter asked. And all were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. (Acts 10:47-48) By water, the word, and the Spirit,

God goes on making new beginnings, expanding our understanding, calling us to join him and our brothers and sisters in new relationship.

To hear of God's doing a new thing, we needed to look no farther than chapter 42 of the Book of Isaiah, the Lord's anointing of his servant to bring forth justice to the nations. Scholars tell us that the servant here was the whole people of ancient Israel. They were in Babylon, exiles grieving and preoccupied with their survival. In their weakened state they could hardly have expected to hear any new word or to be commissioned for any great work. But the Lord spoke and reminded them who they were—God's people anointed by the Spirit of God for a purpose.

Even in exile they were bound by the covenant to pursue a different way in the world from the other nations, to be a light to the nations, showing them the way. Israel was God's servant. Unlike Babylon, therefore, she would not beat down the weak, break a bruised reed, or quench a dimly burning wick. She was God's agent of justice, called to reorder life so that the poor, the weak and the vulnerable—widows, orphans and aliens—could live in safety, dignity, and well-being. (Walter Brueggemann, Isaiah40-66 (Louisville, Ky., Westminster, John Knox Press 1998), 42.

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, the early church saw in him the fulfillment of Isaiah's servant prophecies. At his baptism he was named God's chosen servant, anointed and commissioned by the Spirit, to bring forth God's justice and peace in the earth—something we are not able to do on our own. His baptism by John was his first act in reconciling the world to God. It was the beginning of the new thing God was doing, that would be completed on the cross. It began with water, the Spirit, and the word.

In baptism, we *receive* what God has done in Jesus. Dying with him in the water of baptism, we are released from the power of sin, we die to the power of what separates us from God and neighbor and leads only to death. We rise with him to new life.

Our baptism is a beginning, by water, Spirit, and word. It is a choice we make to enter into a new way of life, to live in ways that honor God and make for peace, dignity and well-being for all our neighbors. Like the baptism of Jesus, our baptism is a commissioning, our task to be part of his work of establishing God's justice and peace in the earth.

To establish God's justice and peace in the earth! We know this task is too great for us. But, like John the Baptist, we consent to permit God to use us to do what *does* seem too great for us, trusting in the power and guidance of the Spirit, in the community, to lead us in whatever new and unexpected ways God has prepared for us to walk in. Again and again, we will be presented with some new, unexpected insight—some new epiphany, that will call us into deeper relationship and commitment, new risk and vulnerability, as servants of God and our neighbors.

It is in Matthew that Jesus tells the disciples, “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (5:48) Baptism does not make anyone perfect. It does set us on the way. As Martin Luther wrote:

This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness; not health but healing; not being but becoming; not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are drawing toward it, the process is not yet finished but it is going on, this is not the end but it is the road.

Into this new life and relationship with God in Christ, Bryan, Lelia, Nicole, and Paul have chosen to bring Wyatt Coulter this day. They are ready to promise to bring Wyatt up in this faith and life so that, in time, he will be able to stand and affirm his commitment for himself and to live into it through all his days. This is the new life and relationship we proclaim and affirm as we witness the promises of baptism, and promise to support uphold Wyatt in them—as we support and uphold everyone in the community of faith. This is the new life and covenant we reaffirm ourselves this day.

Touch and see. Look and hear. Something astounding is happening. God is doing a new and surprising thing. A new relationship is born; an established relationship is reaffirmed and renewed. It all begins, and begins again in water, the Spirit of God, and the word spoken by the voice: “This is my child, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”