

Matthew 3:13-17 New Living Translation (NLT)

<sup>13</sup> Then Jesus went from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. <sup>14</sup> But John tried to talk him out of it. *“I am the one who needs to be baptized by you,”* he said, *“so why are you coming to me?”*

<sup>15</sup> But Jesus said, *“It should be done, for we must carry out all that God requires.”* So John agreed to baptize him.

<sup>16</sup> After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him. <sup>17</sup> And a voice from heaven said, *“This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.”*

Leader: The Word of God for the People of God.

**People: Thanks be to God.**

### The Heavens Are Opened

1.8.17

Opening story

Well, for the next few weeks, we will be exploring the call to share our faith with others.

We'll take some time to *explore our call as baptized children of God.*

Over the next few weeks, as we embark this new series we'll call *“The Great Invitation,”* the focus will be on *sharing the good news* of Jesus Christ with others. This is a time for us to *invite others* to “come and see” Who Jesus is, what following Him means, and what He teaches about life. We will grow as we invite others to join us on the journey. We will be exploring the role of all baptized believers in the mission of the church.

In short, we are going to be talking about *evangelism*. One definition: *“One beggar showing another beggar where to find bread.”*

Honestly, as I think about the notion of sharing our faith with others, it puts a lump in my throat. My heart races and my palms grow sweaty.

I think these experiences with evangelism have convinced me that I do not have the gift of Evangelism. And since I don't have the gift, then I don't have the responsibility!

*Wait a minute! That may not exactly be true.*

Maybe I have this all wrong. I can relate with the pastor whose fear and avoidance of faith sharing is *“because I wrongly understood the term to refer to a single event that was focused on manipulating, coercing, or even scaring people into making a decision for Christ.”* (Chesser)

“In his book, Evangelism for Non-Evangelists: Sharing the Gospel Authentically, author Mark Teasdale notes that this experience of the word “evangelism” is not unusual.

He argues that when we set evangelism up entirely around making a decision, it naturally implies an either/or conclusion: either you are with me and you convert, or you are not and you suffer the consequences.

He suggests that the key to reclaiming our ability to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others is to move away from presenting our own experience of faith as an either/or proposition:

*“Evangelism entails sharing the good news of God with the hope that people will hear it and receive it. If the person believes something that is harmful toward others or inaccurate about God, then we want the person to*

*accept the good news in place of those beliefs. By the same token, an evangelist should never condemn people. As evangelists we invite others to consider and be challenged by the good news of God in Jesus Christ. We do not issue a blanket condemnation of those who disagree with that good news.*” (Mark Teasdale, *Evangelism for Non-Evangelists: Sharing the Gospel Authentically*; Downers Grove, Illinois: IV Press, 2016)

Today we focus on the Baptism of Christ. And we take a cue from our Lord Jesus Himself.

In the scripture this morning, we find John at the Jordan baptizing those who are confessing their sins. Suddenly Jesus appears, wanting to be baptized. John resists, but Jesus insists. And he is baptized. The Heavens open.

The Spirit descends like a dove. A voice from Heaven affirms Jesus as the Son of God. (Communicator's Commentary, Matthew, © 1982 Myron Augsburger, NT Vol 1; ch. 1 "The Person of the King"; pp. 21 -58)

*“(JOHN'S) message was a call to repentance, a genuine renewal of piety...” “... repentance meant turning away from sin and turning toward God.” “To repent meant to live the life that God means for us to live.”*

*“Baptism for John was a symbol of repentance, a symbol of cleansing from sin and turning away from the old life to a new life.”*(Communicator's Commentary, Matthew, © 1982 Myron Augsburger, NT Vol 1; ch. 1 "The Person of the King"; pp. 21 -58)

### WHY WAS JESUS BAPTIZED?

> Not for repentance; He was the sinless One

> *“Fulfill all righteousness”* - accomplish God's mission, advancing God's work

Jesus was baptized because He was:

- 1) Personally confessing sin on behalf of the entire nation (Nehemiah, Ezra, Moses, Daniel)
- 2) Showing support for what John was doing
- 3) Inaugurating His public ministry
- 4) Identifying with the penitent people of God

*“Although He didn't NEED baptism Jesus accepted it in obedient service to God.”* (NRSV Life Application Bible, © 1990 Tyndale House Publishers; Matthew 3; pp. 1602 -1604)

Augsburger concurs that Jesus' baptism signifies the BEGINNING OF HIS PUBLIC MINISTRY- After living in Nazareth His whole life, Jesus was instructed by His Heavenly Father to begin His public ministry. *“His act of being baptized by John was a complete and full identification with the Kingdom (of Heaven).”*(Communicator's Commentary, Matthew, © 1982 Myron Augsburger, NT Vol 1; ch. 1 "The Person of the King"; pp. 21 -58)

After the Heavens Opened and the Dove landed on Jesus, a Voice from Heaven spoke:

*“This is My Beloved Son, in Whom I am well-pleased.”* (v. 17) (Communicator's Commentary, Matthew, © 1982 Myron Augsburger, NT Vol 1; ch. 1 "The Person of the King"; pp. 21 -58)

In a similar way, our journey toward discipleship begins with our baptism. When we baptize an infant or child, we are initiating them into the community of God's people. We mark them with water, symbolically recognizing before the community of faith that even though they do not yet recognize it for themselves, God's grace is within them. We pray for the Holy Spirit to guide them on their journey. And we covenant as a community of faith to show them, by our example, what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ so that one day they will experience God's saving grace and make a confession of faith in Christ for themselves.

As United Methodists, we believe that experiencing assurance of God's grace is a critical step in the journey toward a deeper relationship with the living Lord. But we also believe that the way it happens varies widely.

For some, assurance might take place at the moment of baptism. When that happens, it is very exciting and should be celebrated in the life of the congregation!

But for those who were baptized as infants or young children, encountering the living Lord happened at a time other than baptism. Maybe at confirmation. Maybe a revival, or a camp/retreat experience, or at a gathering of young people, or through campus ministry, or when receiving the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Or maybe it happened in an unexpected way. For many of us, the heavens have been opened, God has spoken, and conversion has happened more than once. Conversions happen whenever we are reminded that God's grace, which was recognized in our baptism, has not just been planted, but has taken root and is continuing to grow in us. This is why it is so important for us to remember our baptisms and celebrate them as a worshiping community. Because as Methodists, we don't believe it is something we have done or said, that has saved us. We believed it is God who has saved us. It is God who reached out to us first, in love and grace. It is God who sent Jesus into this world to show us how to live as God's people. It is God who has saved us and offered us eternal life!

Conversion experiences are not something we can manufacture, coerce, or manipulate. The assurance of being saved, of trusting in Christ alone, and feeling the relief that our sins have been taken away is simply a profound response to what God has already done for us. (Dawn Chesser)

Friends, the good news is that God loves us and wants the best for us and equips us to serve others.

Friends, evangelism is not just about helping someone make a decision. It isn't just about planting seeds. It's about cultivating where seeds have already been planted. It's about being the church, showing God's unconditional love and grace to any and all, especially to those we may not know or like.

When have the heavens opened up to you?

When have you heard the voice of God?

When did you know that Jesus took away your sins?

When did Jesus invite you to be a disciple?

Every person is different, and God speaks to each of us in the way that we can most easily hear. There is no single way that is right or wrong, better or worse, typical or unusual. But one thing is certain: the seeds of the grace of God shown in Jesus Christ are planted in our hearts long before we recognize them for ourselves. This is what Wesley called "prevenient grace." It is grace that goes before us. It is the grace by which we are marked in the sacrament of Christian baptism. It is the grace that lifts us up when we struggle, fills us with joy, and enables us to strive to be more loving all our days. And we believe this grace is available to all. We believe it is the seed that is planted in the heart of every single person who has ever lived. Today, as we join together in the ritual of remembering our own baptisms, let us be reminded that first and foremost we are saved because God first reached out in love to us. Let us remember, and let us be grateful. (Chesser)

Mark Teasdale (*Evangelism for Non-Evangelists*) notes that because the seeds have been sown in people's hearts, we don't have to plant the seeds, because God has already done that. All we have to do is to cultivate them...make sure the conditions are right for those seeds to grow... show by our own lives that those seeds have been planted in us too... bear fruit so that everyone who meets us is able to see we are disciples of Jesus Christ. All we have to do is share the good news of Jesus Christ with others... share what we have known personally.

Over the coming weeks, we have two challenges: First, that you will take time to consider why you have chosen to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and what difference it makes in your life. Begin to name and claim your own personal faith story and to practice sharing those stories

Second, that you prayerfully consider inviting someone to worship with our community of faith.

As baptized members of the Body of Christ, let us commit ourselves to being the church, living holy lives, and cultivating the seeds that God has already planted. Let us reflect the love of Christ wherever we go. Amen.