

**Sermon Bytes: Looking again  
Matthew 3:13–17**

**January 8, 2017**  
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A number of years ago during a trip to Israel, I stood on the banks of the Jordan at the place where Jesus was baptized. I was struck by a few things.

First of all The water was not fresh and clear and free flowing. It was kind of brownish and when I walked into it, the clay squeezed up between my toes.

Secondly, we had a bit of conundrum. The official baptizers – the professionals who were hired to baptize the strays that came in without their own clergy types were gone for the day. I was the only clergy in the crew, and then since we were an Episcopalian, a Lutheran, a Baptist, and a 4 times-a-year Unitarian and a United, how the baptism would happen? And who would do it? After a bit of a negotiation, the others agreed that it was OK with them If I did their baptisms, and they would work together to baptize me.

The third thing I remember was the confusion. We were a small group along with 4 larger groups who were going through the process at that time. Where would our small group fit in?

While all this was happening, I had a bit of an Epiphany. You know what that is don't you? It's one of those moments when the light bulb goes on above your head, and you suddenly see or understand differently than you did before. No, there were no bright lights and voices from heaven. That was exactly the point: it was all so ordinary. The confusion, the negotiation, the dirty water, and yet there was still this sacred feeling of oneness with others and with God.

Epiphany. The word comes from the Greek, "epiphaneia," meaning "appearing" or "revealing." In Epiphany we leave mangers and swaddling clothes behind, and turn to stories of shimmering revelation. Doves and voices. Water. Wine. Transfiguration.

In Celtic Christianity, Epiphany stories are stories of "thin places," places where the boundary between the mundane and the eternal becomes permeable. God parts the curtain, and we catch glimpses of love, majesty, and grace. Epiphany calls us to look beneath and beyond the ordinary surfaces of our lives, and discover the extraordinary.

The problem? In spite of what I have seen on the net of the pictures from the Hubble I have yet to see the star in the East. I have never seen the Spirit descend like a dove, never heard a divine Voice in the clouds. I've never watched water become wine, or seen Jesus' clothes blaze white on a mountaintop. Though I have professed belief in Emmanuel – God who is with us - I have not experienced God in any of the ways the Epiphany stories describe.

Now I may be going out on a limb here, but I bet I am not alone. I don't know many 21st century Christians who bask in signs and wonders, or who complain that God talks too much or butts into their lives too often. But I know plenty of believers who experience

God as hidden or silent. faithful people who long for epiphany — not just for a season, but for lifetimes.

Today in my mind's eye I stand once again on Matthew's account of Jesus's baptism and find myself wondering: How can I bridge the gap between an ancient Voice and a modern silence? Heaven opened. A dove descended. God spoke. I want to believe. Really I do. But to accept the supernatural in Scripture is to plunge into a sea of hard questions:

If God spoke audibly in the past, why is God silent now?

If God does speak, why not to me?

Has God retreated? Changed? Left?

Am I unworthy?

Or are the ancient stories of Epiphany figurative? Was the dove, in fact, just a dove, and the voice from heaven no more than some distant thunder?

When we speak of epiphanies, are we really just trucking in metaphor? It's kind of embarrassing in our modern scientific age to talk about miracles.

According to Christian historian John Dominic Crossan, Jesus's baptism story was an "acute embarrassment" for the early Church, too, but for reasons very different from our modern ones. What scandalized the Gospel writers was not the miraculous, but the ordinary. Doves and voices? All well and good — but the Messiah placing himself under the tutelage of a rabble-rouser like John? God's incarnate Son receiving a baptism of repentance? Perfect, untouchable Jesus? What was he doing in that murky water, aligning himself with the great unwashed? I suppose every age has its signature difficulties with faith. When we're not busy flattening miracle into mirage, we're busy turning sacrament into scandal.

After all, what's most incredulous about this story? That the Holy Spirit became a bird? Or that Jesus threw his reputation aside to get dunked alongside sinners? Or that God looked down at the very start of Jesus ministry and called him Beloved, well before Jesus had accomplished a thing worth praising?

Let me ask the question differently: What do we find most impossible to believe: that God appears by means so familiar, we miss it? Or that our baptisms bind us to all of humanity in such a way that you and I are kin, responsible for each other in ways we fail too often to honor? Or that we are God's Beloved?

Here's my real problem with Epiphany: we always, always have a choice — and most of the time, we tune out. Or we say "Not now God.". Shouldn't God's revelations bowl us over? Shouldn't the thin places be marked such that I am left choice-less, powerless, sinless? Freed of all doubts, and spilling over with faith?

But no, we get to choose. No matter how many times God shows up in my life, I'm free to say no. No matter how often God calls me Beloved, I can choose to turn away from that eternal embrace. No matter how many times I remember my baptism, I'm free to dredge out of the water the very sludge I came to wash off. No matter how often I

reaffirm my vow to seek and serve Christ in all persons, I'm at liberty to reject you and walk away.

The stories of Epiphany are stories of light, and yet they are also shadow. The Visitation of the Magi leads to the Slaughter of the Innocents. Jesus' baptism drives him directly into the wilderness of temptation. Soon after he's transfigured, he dies. There is no indication, anywhere in Scripture, that revelation leads to happily-ever-afters. It is quite possible to stand in the hot white center of a thin place, and see nothing but our own reflection. Yet we speak so glibly of faith, revelation of God. As if it's all easy. As if what matters most is whether we sprinkle or immerse, dunk babies or adults.

I don't know about you, but I find so much of this maddening. How much nicer it would be if the font were self-evidently holy. But no — the font is just water — it's just water. The thin place is just here in this spot, or maybe over there, a forest, a hilltop, beside a dirty running river. The voice that might be God might also be wind, thunder, indigestion, or delusion.

What I mean to say is that there is no magic — we practice Epiphany. The challenge is always before us. Look again. See freshly. Stand in the place that might possibly be thin, and regardless of how jaded you feel, cling to the possibility of surprise.

New Testament scholar Marcus Borg suggests that Jesus himself is our thin place. He's the one who crosses the barrier, and shows us the God we long for. He's the one who stands in line with us at the water's edge, willing to immerse himself in shame, scandal, repentance, and pain — all so that we might hear the only Voice that can tell us who we are and whose we are in this sacred season.

Listen. We are God's own. God's children. God's pleasure. Even in the deepest water, we are Beloved.