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Matthew 3:13 -17

Reaffirmation of Baptism: The Work of the Spirit

### **Matthew 3:13-17**

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

The headline on CNN caught my attention: "Earth's inner core may have stopped turning and could go into reverse, study suggests."<sup>1</sup> Well, that sounds pretty serious - as in should I stock up on tuna fish and cereal and water -- and do I really need to pay my Visa bill this month? And thank God the solar panels at the church were connected last week. But before I panicked too much, I checked out the NY Times and their headline was a bit less alarming, although still provocative, "Earth's Inner Core: A Shifting, Spinning Mystery's Latest Twist." The article opens by asking us to "Imagine Earth's inner core — the dense center of our planet — as a heavy, metal ballerina. This iron-rich dancer is capable of pirouetting at ever-changing speeds." <sup>2</sup>

I never really considered the inner core of the earth as a dancer, but I'll go with that metaphor. The article shares that, "In the early 1970s, relative to someone standing on Earth's surface, the inner core was not spinning. From then, the inner core has gradually spun faster eastward, eventually overtaking the speed of rotation of Earth's surface. Afterward, the inner core's spin decelerated until its rotation appeared to have stopped at some point between 2009 and 2011."<sup>3</sup> Maybe that explains both disco in the 1970's and the Haiti earthquake in 2010.

The article continued the surprising (at least to me) news that "The inner core is now starting to gradually spin westward relative to Earth's surface. It will likely accelerate then decelerate once again, reaching another apparent standstill in the 2040s and completing its latest eastward-westward spin cycle." Now, not being a geologist or even playing one on TV, this seems pretty significant to me. The article, however, ends on a reassuring note, that while there may be tangible effects deep within the planet's core, these changes "may only be capable of stirring up comparatively minor turbulence closer to the surface — perhaps by

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/25/world/earth-core-turning-scli-scen-intl/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/23/science/earth-core-reversing-spin.html>

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

causing subtle shifts in the planet's magnetic field, or even by very slightly tweaking the length of a day, which is known to increase and decrease by a fraction of a millisecond every six years."<sup>4</sup>

I'm not sure I am completely reassured by this designation as "minor"- but it reminded me of a mantra I used to say to students when I was teaching statistics - not everything that is statistically significant is biologically meaningful and effects that are not statistically significant can still be meaningful if you happen to be the one affected.

As we heard last week in the scripture Rebekah read and preached, John, the one we know as John the Baptist, was in Bethany on the east side of the Jordan river and he was busy telling people to repent and that while he was baptizing with water, he was preparing the people for one who would follow him. In Matthew's gospel, just before our scripture passage from this morning, we hear that people went out to John from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. John was doing a lot of baptisms! So one more descent into the water would barely have been noticed, certainly not statistically significant, and yet here we are celebrating Baptism of the Lord Sunday, for Jesus himself was baptized.

The scene plays out in slow motion - almost as if the inner core of the earth had stopped turning, allowing the heavens and the earth to pirouette at the same speed and dance together for one brief moment before turning in a new direction. "And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Imagine you are on the shore of the river watching this baptism - the heavens opening, God the Father speaking, a dove descending and perching on Jesus. What must you make of this scene - a shifting, spinning mystery to use the NY Times headline language? For all of its concreteness - water sprinkled on a head or an immersion in a pool of water and the simple words I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, the sacramental nature of baptism can still evoke mystery, especially for those of us who were baptized as infants.

In the Presbyterian reformed tradition, the Sacraments - baptism and communion – mark the church's identity, mission, and ministry. They help to identify the church as a covenant community— the people of God and the body of Christ, joined in committed relationship to God and to one another through Christ.

Sacraments are visible and tangible ways of experiencing God's immeasurable grace and unfathomable goodness. We refer to the Sacraments as "signs" and "seals"—signs of God's

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

gracious promise and seals of God's life-giving Word. They show us who God is and what God has done for us and for our salvation in Jesus Christ, expressing God's claim upon our lives.

The Sacraments are Trinitarian events. They represent our celebration of, and participation in, the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. They are gifts of God the Father's goodness and grace. We receive these gifts only by the power of the Holy Spirit, who also works through the Sacraments to equip us for ministry in Christ's name.<sup>5</sup>

I very much like this language of the "work" of the sacraments. Through the power of the Holy Spirit they equip us for ministry in Christ's name. This may be most apparent – most tangible – in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Rebekah and I invite you each month to taste and see that the Lord is good; we ask the Holy Spirit to be present and transform us; we remind you that the bread and the cup are gifts from God for all us – for the people of God; we conclude with a prayer that acknowledges that we are fed at the Table so that we can be sent out into the world to be Christ's presence with others. Each time we receive the bread and drink from the cup we are reminded that we are equipped for ministry in Christ's name.

Unlike the regularity of the rhythm of communion, baptism, on the other hand, happens just once in your life in our Presbyterian tradition. You may have been baptized in a Methodist Church or a Baptist Church or a Roman Catholic Church and we recognize that baptism. As the writer of the letter to the Ephesians says, "there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."<sup>6</sup> It is helpful to periodically "remember our baptisms" by engaging with our baptismal liturgy as we are doing this morning.

This liturgy begins with sentences of scripture, reminding us a purpose of baptism is to connect us as a community- we are baptized into one body – into the community of Christ. This morning we distributed Bibles to our children as a way of recognizing the importance of the baptismal promises we make to nurture our children. The baptismal liturgy includes a Thanksgiving for the Waters of Baptism, acknowledging the power of water to create, liberate, cleanse and renew us and we hear throughout our scriptures. The questions asked reflect the multiple layers of our understanding of baptism – a call to recognize Jesus as our Lord and Savior, a call to discipleship, and a call to repentance.

Baptism is deeply tied to our understanding of confession and forgiveness. Last Sunday, I shared the prayer of confession from the font as a reminder of this connection. In the

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<sup>5</sup> Adapted from *Gifts of God: The Sacraments* written by Rev. David Gambrell, Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Available online at

<https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/1899/sermon-series-our-baptismal-vows>

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 4:4-6

sacrament of baptism, we pledge (or our parents pledge on our behalf) that we will turn from away from sin and turn toward Jesus. This is the definition of “repentance” that John the Baptist called out – it is a two-fold process – turning away and turning toward.

In baptism we acknowledge that Christ came to free us from the prison of sin and death and that in Christ we are a new creation. In the Promise of the Gospel we share each week, we don’t just acknowledge this grace we have received, we give thanks for it and we celebrate it, saying “Thanks be to God. Alleluia. Amen.” In our often “decently and in order” Presbyterian tradition, an Alleluia counts as a celebration. However, if any of you feel called to dance in the aisles, that would be just fine by me.

This promise of the gospel – this reminder that in Christ we are a new creation, our old life is gone, is something to celebrate. Further we are called to live as a people who recognize that we are forgiven – we are reconciled to God. And because we are forgiven, we extend that same forgiveness to others, seeking to be reconciled not only to God, but also to each other. We do this each week by passing the peace of Christ to each other. Yesterday, a group of us gathered to offer an apology to our Black siblings in Christ for the sin of slavery and its aftermath. As we repented of past wrongs, we also acknowledged that a one-time statement is not enough. We will need to do more to continue the work of reconciliation. We will need to learn from each other. We will need to put our resources of time and talent and treasures toward the hard work of justice. We will need to be repairers of the breach. And we will need the power of the Holy Spirit to equip us for this ministry of reconciliation, a ministry being done in Christ’s name. A ministry we are called to if we take our baptismal vows seriously. If we take why we gather together each Sunday morning seriously.

Earlier this month I read a portion of a sermon on baptism by Pastor Jennifer Williams. She started the sermon by asking everyone why they were there, saying “Seriously, ask yourself the question and really ponder it for a moment. Why are you in church this morning?” She goes on to list the various reasons people give for attending church. And concludes her list with this wonderfully succinct rationale, “...we all are here to worship God in community. We come to meet God here in this sanctuary and to learn about our faith and how to serve Jesus Christ. That is our promise at baptism, that we will be present with the people of God.”<sup>7</sup>

Being present with each other matters. That is our promise at baptism. We started our Reaffirmation of Baptism with these words from holy scripture: Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

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<sup>7</sup> Jennifer H. Williams. Sermon Series: Our Baptismal Vows. *Ministry Matters*. September 28th, 2011. Available online at [ministrymatters.com/all/entry/1899/sermon-series-our-baptismal-vows](http://ministrymatters.com/all/entry/1899/sermon-series-our-baptismal-vows)

We drink of one Spirit which unites us across all of the differences we can name – gender, race, political ideology, ethnic background, education, class, what version of the Bible we read – even whether we bleed green and white or maize and blue. That is the work of the Holy Spirit – because as sure as it will snow on a Saturday night – we humans cannot bridge these divides on our own.

Pastor Williams reminds us that “We know that when we sit in the pews, when we talk to one of our sisters or brothers in the faith, when we listen to the beauty of the organ or the choir lifts their voices in song, when we hear the words of Christ proclaimed, we know why we are here. We know that Christ has given us a wonderful and powerful gift. ... We are here to be present with one another, our families, and to be in the presence of God. We come to worship God and to be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>8</sup>

We have reaffirmed our baptismal promises this morning. The question for us now is what will we do as people filled with the power of the Holy Spirit? A question I often ask of church leaders in visioning sessions, is what would you do if you knew you couldn't fail? What do you fear – what is the worst possible thing that could happen? Friends, we have passed through the waters of baptism. We have been redeemed. We have been liberated. We have freed from sin and death so that we might serve as Christ's body here on earth. As the choir will sing in a minute, “Be not afraid. We have been called by name”. The inner core of the earth may stop spinning or even change its direction, but we have been claimed by God in the waters of baptism and empowered by the Spirit to minister in Christ's name. Let us go forth in boldness and confidence. Join me in prayer.

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid*