

# Opening Our Own Heaven

The Baptism of Jesus Sunday sermon by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers presented January 15th, 2017,  
at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Matthew 3: 13-17

Think about a time in your life, one moment that stands out above all the rest, when you might say that you saw the heavens open up and a definitive watershed, the moment of truth for your entire life – “revealed itself?” Some people can name such a moment. Others cannot, no matter how much they think about it or wish it were true. Maybe this is because there have been many moments, so that they just can’t pick a single one to name above the rest.

Goethe’s epic German poem tells the story of how a highly successful, but dissatisfied, scholar named Faust sold his soul to the devil in order to have fame and fortune. Then, when the devil came to claim Faust for his own, Faust put up such a plea to cancel the contract that the devil granted him a reprieve, provided that he could pick out from his life a single moment in which he wished to be suspended and frozen forever. You know the rest of the story. He could not decide. He could not choose a single moment to save his soul in which he would choose to be forever. Are there any Faust’s present here today?

After a time of deep reflection Jesus is finally in the water with John, the famous baptizer. John himself is all too conscious of the momentous action this baptism might be – “I ought to be baptized by you, and yet you have come to me!” Jesus comes to the moment after all those hidden years in the carpenter’s shop, he is ready to come out of the workshop and in to the open. Neither his nor John’s high expectations were disappointed. And the divine voice was heard to say, “This is my own dear Son, with whom I am pleased.” A dove hovered over the waters just as the Spirit of God hovered over the waters of creation in the first days. Here was the sign of a new creation and Jesus could not mistake it.

Jesus’ baptism is described with high intensity. The implication is, I think, that only Jesus himself sees the heavens opened and hears the divine voice. Is the Gospel writer telling us this was a special and profound experience for Jesus? Such a moment of intensity and holy intimacy is hard to share, other people often can’t recognize it.

I found viewing the first-hand the spawning cycle of salmon on British Columbia’s Victoria Island a life changing experience, but no one else seemed to understand why I found it so profound. No one else until that day I met a person who had also stood where I had stood next to the thundering river. People describe a similar sense of holy intimacy and being unable to communicate the experience when it comes to birth and death. The experience goes beyond the self and inevitably touches other lives. The baptism of Jesus means that the Spirit of God is with him, his life has taken a new direction, as it was always meant to and there is no going back. The ultimate result of this baptism is the redemption of the world!

In John’s Gospel there is no direct reference to the baptism at all. (Just a note here: John’s gospel was *not* written by John The Baptist, but by another John.) Yet this is the moment when Christ’s individual act becomes the falling domino that will lead to so many other acts. The early Christians used characters from the Old Testament to interpret what was going on in this act and to make plain the connection between the personal and the social. So Jesus is the new Adam, the human male that God intended men to be. The new David, anointed to kingship in order to ransom his people Israel. Jesus is the new Noah who will carry his people through the destructive waters of death and sin. Jesus is the new Moses, who will lead his people beyond the reach of their enemies through the waters of the Red Sea of despair and power’s abuse. And Jesus is the new Joshua who will lead his

people over the troubled Jordan to the promised land of God's Kingdom. All these things begin in the waters of baptism.

And finally, this is all part of the gracious activity of God – it is God's plan and purpose. Jesus leaves the carpenter's shop and sudden sets about his mission; his destiny. Prepared for and expected in some ways, but in others a shock that leads John the Baptist to wonder what is going on, and sends Jesus' family after him to curb his supposed madness. Deep questions are being raised; some greet what's happening with joy but others with hostility. Suddenly everyone has to have an opinion about this carpenter. What begins in the waters of the River Jordan must go on until the Friday of Calvary and the Sunday in the Garden. There can be no turning back.

There was a bad snowstorm in western Canada last month. Winnipeg's Airport had been closed for hours. The passenger agent was desperately trying to reschedule a long line of weary travelers stranded somewhere between where they had left and where they were going. Finally a priest found his way to the head of the line. "What is your final destination," asked the agent. "Heaven, I hope," said the priest. "But today I'll settle for Toronto"; which pretty much sums up where most of us regarding our baptism.

The story of Jesus' baptism becomes our story: for we are marked by God to be going somewhere, though too often others claim not to notice the sign. We also must contend with the spiritual high-spots that so soon leave us to the struggles of daily living out our faith. We also must choose so that personal faith has social consequences. We, too, must open ourselves to the heaven that awaits us. Then like our Saviour, once touched by the hand of God at our baptism, heavens gates fly open to us and there can be no turning back.