



Westminster Presbyterian Church

Sue Hamilton - January 8, 2017 Sermon

Turning Points - Threshold to New Beginnings

Isaiah 42: 1-9, Matthew 3:13-17

Bulletin Quote

"What a grand thing, to be loved! What a grander thing still, to love!"
Victor Hugo. 19th century

Scripture text:

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

Matthew 3:16

Being a part of a military family for twenty years we did our fair share of moving, not as much as some families I know, but still on a regular basis. There was, however, a time that gave us pause. It occurred early on when the children were young and we were living in Wichita. I was serving in a Presbyterian Church where we were all connected, when Uncle Sam decided it was time for us to head north to Alaska. For several weeks Steve and I engaged in late night conversation after the kids were in bed, seeking to determine what was best for our family. A decision needed to be made; whose career was going to lead? Praying individually and together we came to a mutual decision; we would head north to the last frontier. Around that time a little book found its way into my hands, titled, *Don't Look Back*, illustrated by Mary Engelbreit. The cover depicted a little hobo figure eagerly embarking on a journey. Having just passed a fork in the road where a sign post was planted; the arrow which read, *Your Life*, pointed in the direction the hobo was traveling, while the sign pointing in the opposite direction, said, *No Longer an Option*. Relating to this figure I began to get excited, even in the midst of all the difficult feelings involved in letting go. The picture became somewhat of an anchor or inspiration in this time of change. Needing more than a knapsack and small suitcase, as the figure carried, plans began in earnest for our new adventure.

Turning points, moments of significant change that take us in a different direction, occur in each of our lives. Centered on the physical, spiritual, cognitive, relational or emotional parts of our beings, some involve choice, while others can feel like they are thrust upon us. We tend to categorize them accordingly; choice being acquainted with the positive, and the unwanted with the negative. Though we gravitate towards the one and push against the latter, in reality most times of significant change contain aspects of beauty and of loss. More importantly, they can open us to deeper love.

In addition, turning points are never just our own. They affect the lives of those around us and usher in new influences. Take for instance a young person's college choice, where in the ensuing years a professor's impact significantly stimulates and challenges thought thereby shaping the direction and outlook of this young adult life for years to come. Or an individual who has journeyed through illness and in regained health is compelled to take what they have learned to support and guide others living with a similar circumstance. Or one who is blessed with an unexpected gift that makes possible the opportunity for advanced study or training, or will ease financial burden.

The scriptures are full of turning points in the unfolding of God's story of love for humanity, with the birth of Jesus having the greatest influence, setting off an unending ripple of life altering moments. Consider Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zachariah, Simeon and Anna, the shepherds and wise men, even the Scribes and the Pharisees, King Herod, himself, and continuing through the centuries, including the present. As a devotional thought expressed, the Baptism of Jesus, in our passage today, can also be seen as a turning-point in the gospel; the point at which Jesus – who until then might have appeared to be an ordinary man, with the notable exception of Luke's account of Jesus in the temple – receives the Holy Spirit and is announced, "Son of God". For Jesus too, it is a defining moment when his own sense of *who he is* is clarified and confirmed and he is empowered for his ministry.¹

For John the Baptist, there is initial resistance, something not uncommon in turning-point experiences. Think of a time when you determined a course of action, thoughtfully, prayerfully, but not all agreed with you, immediately, or perhaps at all, and you'll know what I mean. More understanding is needed and perhaps the space of time. Often the closer we are to a situation or the more we have vested in it, the harder it can be to see or consider something new. Matthew offers a glimpse into their conversation. Though John has been the foreteller of Jesus, the one for whom his call to repentance points, Jesus is not to baptize him. Confusion is understandable. Those gathered along the Jordan's banks have come to John for baptism because they know they are in need of cleansing, of forgiveness. Here Jesus arrives, one without sin, and wanting the same.

Seeing John's struggle, Jesus replies, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Perhaps John understood what he meant but I need a translation. To fulfill all righteousness is not a phrase I hear or would use and however righteousness is to be defined there is this instinctive feeling that it is something to shy away from. Righteousness feels stuffy and aloof and not very friendly. Reading I find clarification. Jesus is not indicating a "legal" standing or position before God, but uses this word as an aspect of discipleship, setting the stage for the very thing his life will be about. John is to baptize Jesus as an act of submission and obedience to God. In doing so, John not only participates in God's unfolding purpose for Jesus, but he also through his action testifies to the coming of God's kingdom, the same thing which he had been proclaiming with words.² Turning points by their nature often have an element of surprise.

John baptizes Jesus, and as he comes up from the water, the heavens suddenly open to him and the Spirit of God descends like a dove, alighting on him. One of the amazing things to me about the Christian life is how the Word of God never ceases to offer something new. How many times have I read this story but never noticed the word, alighting. I guess previously I imaged the dove or the clouds, I am not sure; all I know is that the word, alighting, captured my attention this week. When something alights, the dictionary says, it settles or stays after descending. The Spirit of God remains with Jesus.

It is a good thing because what happens next is that the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness. Not on his agenda for the day I am sure, any more than you or I plan for wilderness times in our lives, yet they occur. I wonder, would it help, would it provide any peace of mind or strength of spirit, to image the spirit alighting upon us the next time we experience ourselves in such a time, or even now, if that is the case. Wanting to hold onto this newly discovered word, I hope during Lent or the next time I read the temptation story, I take the time to remember and visualize the Spirit alighting upon Jesus, even as the tempter seeks to pull Jesus away from his identity or call. Turning points, especially those thrust upon us, invite trust for there is always the element of the unknown.

Accompanying the Spirit descending is a voice, announcing, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Film makers have tried to reconstruct this scene over the years, sometimes interpreting the voice in a deep, booming way. I imagine it with less dramatization; clear, audible, penetrating. You could hear a pin drop as God gives Jesus a new name, beloved. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "Jesus goes into the waters of the Jordan a carpenter and comes out a Messiah. He is the same person, but with a new direction. His being is the same, but his doing is about to take a radical turn."³

This is the nature of our baptism too. We are not any different on the outside, but inwardly marked and sealed by Christ's love. And we also are given a new name, God's beloved. Nurtured by the church, our inner compass is pointed north, directing us to fullness of life, and sometimes needing to have our compass reset. This transformation is captured in the book of Romans, chapter 6:4, "We have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." What does this newness of life look like? There are examples all around us. It may lead to the taking of a radical turn, but more often than not it is found in everyday faithful moments; parents lovingly caring for their children even when they are tired, a friend who takes time to visit one who is sick, volunteering to make the life of another a little better, trying again after experiencing a setback, getting up and dressed in the morning, knowing to do so will require great effort. Each time we rise up from being down, each time we give of ourselves for the kingdom of God, the baptismal waters are moving, restoring and giving life.

We stand at the threshold of a new year. Before any ups or downs unfold, before any celebrations or setbacks occur, or any times of contentment or fret are experienced, may we attest that the Spirit of God alightens upon us, now, and in the days ahead. It calls and

empowers us to be a living, active, presence of love; in our families and in our friendships, in our jobs and in our schools, in our neighborhoods, and in our world. Victor Hugo expresses the opportunity before us with these words; "What a grand thing, to be loved! What a grander thing still, to love!" Amen.

1. See Pray as You Go, January 9, 2017, <http://pray-as-you-go.org/home/>
2. Troy A. Miller, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A Volume 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 239.
3. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Mixed Blessings* (Lanham, MD: Rowan Littlefield Publishers, 1998), p. 58.