

## “He Came Among His Own”

A sermon based on Luke 3:15-22  
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana  
On Sunday, January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
By David Oliver-Holder

Welcome to the Season after Epiphany. Gone are the trees of Advent and Christmas, the lights, the ornaments, and those seasons' music. All packed away. With the arrival of January 6<sup>th</sup>, we begin a new season, with signs and showings, revelations, epiphanies.

For our Orthodox sisters and brothers, January 6<sup>th</sup> is Christmas Day, the day of the revealing of God's Son. That's what an epiphany is. It's a revealing, a revelation. The Latin translation of epiphany is *revelatio*, a term borrowed from the world of theater, a term that refers to the drawing back of the curtain at the beginning of a play. In an epiphany, the curtain is drawn back on God.

Our Celtic ancestors speak of places where it seems the distance between heaven and earth is very small, as thin places, places where an epiphany has happened, or where it just seems like one could happen any moment. One such place has been in two of the most recent Star Wars movies.

At the very end of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, Rey goes in search of Luke Skywalker. She finds him on an Island in the middle of nowhere, leading a kind of monkish life, just like Obewon Kenobe was back on Tatooine, when Luke found him so many years before. The scenes of Rey finding Luke were filmed on Skellig Michael, an island off of the southwest coast of Scotland, on which there used to be a Christian monastery. Skellig Michael is a thin place, a desolate place, a place where one might expect the curtain of this world to be pulled back revealing nothing less than the Divine.

For us western Christians, that is, those of us west of Constantinople, this first Sunday after the day of Epiphany is focused on the first public revealing of the Son of God. You might want to say that the Nativity, Christmas, is when Jesus was first revealed, at his birth. But that was not really a public epiphany. The Baptism of Jesus was the first public revelation of the Son of God. The spot by the River Jordan where John baptized many, forever after has been a thin place, and a place of pilgrimage.

So, what about the nature and intention of God was revealed at the Baptism of Jesus? On what should we focus in this revelation of the Divine? Should we focus on the supernatural, or miraculous aspects, like the dove that some said they saw, or the voice, sounding to some like thunder, that others heard? Maybe.

But what strikes me as I read Luke's account is how ordinary it all seems, and how human Jesus appears. He tells us, "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized..." The actual baptism of Jesus seems not that special. As Luke paints the picture, he portrays Jesus as one of the many people, standing in line with the people, waiting his turn. Only afterwards, as he is praying, does Luke tell us about the dove and the voice from heaven.

If we are honest, many of us sit uncomfortable with signs and miracles. Most of us have never experienced such things, and we tend to be at least a bit skeptical of those who say they have. In this way, we are very much unlike our early Christian ancestors. As scholar, John Dominic Crossan, has written, "the baptism story was an "acute embarrassment" for the early Church, too, but for reasons very different from our modern ones. What scandalized those early Christians 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?"<sup>i</sup> Why would Jesus be in line with the great unwashed masses? There's no epiphany anywhere near there, except a revealing of sweat and dirt and all of the odors arising from them. God revealed in that?

Well, according to Luke, yes. The appearance of the dove, and the sound of the voice, only confirm, making really obvious, what has already happened, what has already been revealed, as Jesus stood in that line, and as he was lowered into the waters, with everyone else.

Maybe this comes as a good word, good news, for us, who wonder what in the world we have to do with what is holy. "Jesus presented himself for baptism as an act of solidarity with a nation and a world of sinners. Jesus simply got in line with everyone else who had been broken by the 'wear and tear' of this selfish world and had all but given up on themselves and their God. When the line of downtrodden and sin-sick

people formed in hopes of new beginnings through a return to God, Jesus joined them. At his baptism he identified with the damaged and broken people who needed God.”<sup>ii</sup>

That, for Luke, is the epiphany. God was revealed in Jesus in that act of solidarity and faithfulness. The question this puts to us is this. How willing are we to do as our Lord? Yes, follow him in baptism, yes, disciples do that, and whenever we celebrate a baptism it is a joyful event. But how willing are we, is our church, to do as Jesus did, as he stood in line with everyone else? How willingly do we really identify with sinners, with the broken, with those who do not yet have their lives neatly in order, with those, in fact, who have made a complete mess of their lives, and maybe even made a mess of other lives, too, like a mother or father, brother or sister, a spouse, or children? Do we expect to meet God among them?

## II

Nadia Bolz-Weber is a good Lutheran, and was, until last year, the founding pastor of the House of All Sinners and Saints in Denver. She is someone who identifies with the broken. As she tells it in her most recent book, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in all the Wrong People*, she is someone who never seemed to fit.

She was raised as a fundamentalist Christian, but left church at some point in her teens. She became an addict, got tattooed, but then became clean and sober. She met a nice Lutheran boy, who also became a pastor. She became a Lutheran, went to seminary in the Twin Cities, became a pastor, and started the church in Denver.

Well, in 2012, she was invited to speak at the huge, Lutheran Youth Gathering that was to meet in New Orleans. Twice she said no, mainly because she didn't think she could talk to teens. But finally, she accepted, and began to get ready.

It was very stressful for her. She ran her ideas past her friends. They were not impressed. She ran her ideas past her own teenage kids. They said, “Whatever.” She thought she was headed for disaster and disgrace. That was her mindset as she boarded the plane to New Orleans. On top of that, her seat was the middle seat.

But then, a teenage girl named Chloe came to sit in the window seat next to her. Bolz-Weber writes that Chloe had pink bangs that hung down over her eyes like a protective visor. She exhibited perfectly that mixed state of so many teens: the pink was bright, inviting attention, yet the hair shielded her eyes, rejecting attention. Sitting down,

and without making eye contact, Chloe notices Bolz-Weber's tattoos and says, "Nice tattoos." That begins a long conversation.

Bolz-Weber learns how Chloe just doesn't fit in. Chloe did not know who her father was. She talked about the restraining order that had to be taken out against her older sister who had hurt her badly the previous year. She talked about how her school kept putting her in special ed classes, when she really was very good at math. She just doesn't like graphs and refuses to fill them in.

They both realize that they are both going to the Youth gathering, and then Chloe says that there are only a couple of the girls in her church youth group who will even talk to her. She confesses that she did not want to come to the Youth Gathering. She said she just didn't feel like she fit.

Bolz-Weber confesses that she stopped thinking and worrying so much about herself, and understood what she needed to say to the 35,000 teens who would be gathering in New Orleans. She began by telling her own story, how she did not fit in, and she said, "Some of your parents and pastors were really upset that I was your speaker tonight. They thought someone with my past shouldn't be allowed to talk to thousands of teenagers. And you know what I have to say about that? They are absolutely right."<sup>iii</sup>

Silence filled the Superdome. "Somebody," she continued, "with my past of alcoholism and drug abuse and promiscuity and lying and stealing shouldn't be allowed to talk to you. But you know what? Somebody with my *present*, who I am *now*, shouldn't be allowed either. I am a sarcastic, heavily-tattooed, angry person who swears like a truck driver! I am a flawed person who really shouldn't be allowed to talk to you. But you know what? That's the God we are dealing with, people!"

She writes that the crowd of teens went nuts, standing and applauding and yelling. Bolz-Weber went on to tell them about this God, how God is always choosing people like her, people like them, imperfect, flawed people for God's holy purposes. Jesus was always associating with the wrong kinds of people, tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers, women, even the self-righteous. This Jesus was killed, he was buried, he was raised, and he continues to be present with us even in ordinary things, like bread and wine, water and words. She told them that this God has never made sense, never fit in.

Is that not what John's Gospel told us? "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him."

She concluded by telling them not to doubt that this God would use them, "and not just your strengths, but your failures and your failings. Your weakness is fertile ground for a forgiving God to make something new and to make something beautiful, so don't ever think that all you have to offer are your gifts."

Reflecting on the whole experience, Bolz-Weber offers that quote that is today's moment for reflection: "Sometimes the fact that there is nothing about you that makes you the right person to do something is exactly what God is looking for."<sup>iv</sup>

### III

I think Luke is right, people of God. The epiphany, the revealing of God in this story, is not so much in the dove, nor in the voice, the voice that only some heard and understood. The epiphany, the revelation, can be seen as Jesus stands with everyone else, the imperfect, the flawed, the tattooed, the broken, waiting in line, and then was baptized along with all the others.

Our God is not a God who stands apart in holiness, and who will only have something to do with us when we get our stuff together, when we get clean, when we get sober. The Gospels tell us that God comes among us and stands with us. As the early saints like to say it, "God became human, so that we might become divine." And God will use you, all of you, for God's holy purposes.

When we are baptized, we say, "I'm down with that. I know I need that. So here I am. Use me." So, people of God, on this First Sunday after Epiphany, remember your baptisms, and be thankful. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Debbie Thomas, "Thin Place, Deep Water," a lectionary essay posted on the website *Journey With Jesus*, January 3, 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> Robert M. Brearley, "Pastoral Perspective" on Luke 3:15-17, 21-22, in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 236.

<sup>iii</sup> Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints*, (New York, New York, Convergent Books, 2015), p. 37.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.