

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Sarah Harrold

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



The Sermon Text — Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

SERMON

There’s a book called *Blue Like Jazz*, written by Donald Miller and it’s self-described as a book of “nonreligious thoughts on Christian spirituality”. Now, while I don’t agree with all of his theology, it’s a fascinating – and easy – read, complete with stories and cartoons that read more like a blog than a book, and it puts to words the very real feelings of most of us when we look at this business of Christianity. But this week I was caught by his author’s note at the very beginning of the book. It reads:

I never liked jazz music because jazz music doesn’t resolve.

But I was outside the Bagdad Theater in Portland one night when I saw a man playing the saxophone. I stood there for fifteen minutes, and he never opened his eyes. After that I liked jazz music.

Sometimes you have to watch somebody love something before you can love it yourself. It is as if they are showing you the way.

I used to not like God because God didn’t resolve. But that was before this happened.

Of course, Mr. Miller goes on to tell his story from there. But I found this opening note to be SO interesting. He didn’t like jazz music. It didn’t resolve. There should be nothing to make him stay and listen to a man playing for fifteen minutes. And yet, there he stood, watching and listening to him play. He stood there, because of the musician’s complete love of the music. “Sometimes you have to watch somebody love something before you can love it yourself. It is as if they are showing you the way.” Yes.

Now, my guess is that you might not have such a dramatic story of conversion to loving something like jazz music. Or maybe you do and you’ve now made your living off of it. I don’t know. But regardless, you’ve probably experienced the same thing as Donald Miller – there was a person or an event that somehow brought you to love whatever it is that you’re now passionate about in life, be it art, science, nature, service work, or juggling. There are people who are incredible at simply being who they are, effortlessly giving us a taste of what inspires them, of what they love. And without them, we would probably be missing out on what are now the greatest parts of our lives.

This is, I think, especially true about faith, church, and God. You have to watch somebody love God and others before

you can do it yourself. You have to experience somebody loving *you*, giving you the gift of faith before faith and love can become your own. You have to hear God say “I love you” before you can believe it.

So I was excited about the scripture texts we read today because I think they show this reality to us. The Isaiah text is perhaps the more explicit – here God is speaking to the nation of Israel through the prophet Isaiah saying, “I love you! You are mine! Why don’t you get it!?” And who wouldn’t want to be connected to such a God? But of course, that’s not always the way we hear God speaking to us. And while ultimately, the message of God’s faithfulness and love remains the same throughout scripture, the gospel this morning shows us that often, this message comes in unexpected ways: like a saxophone player outside the theater. It comes by way of us being captured for an instant and then not being able to leave. And the experience is, almost always, life-transforming.

So this gospel text. We only read five verses – which honestly, is enough to raise all sorts of questions. I read these verses in preparation for preaching this week and had to just kind of stare in wonder. In five verses we have talk of a messiah, baptism, the Holy Spirit, wheat and chaff, unquenchable fire, doves, and voices coming from heaven. I imagine that someone who hasn’t grown up in the church (or even those of us who have) would look at these verses and just be entirely confused – or frightened. And rightly so. Many of the concepts mentioned in these verses are huge concepts that have been defined and re-defined by church history many times over. Christians today can’t agree on what baptism or the Holy Spirit or “unquenchable fire” mean. But if we put all that aside for the moment, I really do think that the story is quite fun.

We have John, Jesus, and the crowd. John was an eccentric who lived in the wilderness, made his clothes out of camel hair, and ate insects as his primary diet. The crowd is what you think it is – a motley group of people who have somehow found themselves together and, well, you know what happens when you put a bunch of people together, and it’s not always a good thing. And Jesus, well, we’ve come now to seeing him as a man with a halo over his head who sits by the campfire and sings Kumbayah, but at the time this story was happening, he would have been a fairly non-descript man and understood only to be a carpenter and nothing else. By this point he had done no miracles, he hadn’t taught in the synagogues, and he hadn’t met a single one of his disciples yet. Now, in one way, this is the make-up of a fairly typical Bible story, but then I’ve always thought that the Bible had a fascination with the absurd. And this is no exception.

So here’s how I imagine things happening. John is being John and walking all over the countryside, preaching. Being that he’s not married and is happy eating bugs, he doesn’t need to go into town to get a job and he doesn’t have to justify his actions to any woman. So he walks – and probably skips – freely, proclaiming: “Prepare the way of the Lord and make his paths straight! Every valley will be filled and every mountain and hill will be made low. The crooked will become straight and the rough ways made smooth and all people will see the salvation of God!”

Come, be baptized and repent of your ways, for God has come to make things right!"

He's not really paying attention to who or what is around him, as the message is for anyone and everyone. At first, there are a couple people who happen to run into him – a businessman out traveling, a nature-lover on a hike, and fishermen doing their work. And as this message of his seems to be in riddles, people don't really give it much thought. But eventually word gets back to town about a madman out by the river, who is claiming that God has come, that life as they know it is going to change, and that they better get themselves out to confess their sin and be baptized and made clean so that they don't come under the wrath of God.

This, of course, stirs a lot of emotions. Some go into panic mode, others are angry because they don't believe they've done anything wrong, some are in denial, and yet others are just simply fascinated by what's going on. People start playing the "what if" game – what if I am doing something wrong? What if my life really isn't worth anything? What if I'm not as secure as I think? And so they go out to John thinking maybe he has the answers. And why not? If you're truly searching, you might as well give him a try. So more and more people come out, and eventually there are masses of people playing hooky from jobs and family just, to stand on the bank of a river and listen to a man who dresses in camel hair and eats insects.

I think it must have been at this point that John realizes what's happened. He's standing in the river, stops what he's doing, and stares at this rather sad-looking group of humans across from him. Immediately his tone changes and he exclaims: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? You've come to save yourselves, but repent and do what is right. Give to those who have less than you and be satisfied with what you have."

I'm not entirely sure how that message could have been seen as encouraging. Had I been one of the people there, I don't think that speech would have made me believe I had sinned and needed to confess. I don't think it would make me want to turn to God. But somehow, it worked and people confessed their sin, were baptized, which was, at the time, a cleansing ritual, and John then used the opportunity to tell them that someone even greater than he was coming. That God was coming to give them the gift of the Holy Spirit, to get rid of the evil in the world, and to build up the good.

In the end, the people would have had to have gone back to their homes. Whether they understood everything that took place was another matter, but I'm sure that, down by that river, people were transformed. New questions came into being, new hopes were conceived, resolutions were made, and the future, while still unknown, was waited for with anticipation.

One other small detail in this story is that Jesus was also baptized. He probably waited in line with everyone else, which is actually pretty cool when you think about it. That the one who is God in human form would stand quietly among people who are lost and confused. That Jesus, who knows and understands God's love and strength, would be standing unknown amongst people who are desperate for it. So Jesus' turn comes and not only was he baptized, but we're told that the Holy Spirit comes to him in the form of a dove and the voice of God says that Jesus is his son and with him, God is pleased.

Now Luke doesn't tell us if the crowd can see or hear any of this, but I like to think that they can't. Which would mean that, out of fascination and fear, people come to listen to John. They leave wondering what sort of world-changing events will take place. And in the meantime, they don't even realize that this rather

insignificant man, who was baptized along with them, was who John was talking about. **He** is the one who will fill the valleys and make the rough places smooth. **He** is the one who will forgive sins and make things right. **He** is the **one** who will bring about the salvation of God.

But even though no one realizes it, these people have now heard the saxophone player on the street corner. They've been introduced to the beauty of jazz – to what it means that God has entered physically into this world, so that when they see Jesus later they recognize him as the same song that John introduced them to. And so the ministry of Jesus begins. Through him, life as we know it is turned upside-down and what we once thought to be absurd speech by a madman in the wilderness, becomes our source of joy. The sick are healed; the sinners are forgiven; those who question, are heard.

This text, more than anything else, is about God showing up in our lives in unexpected ways. It's about God bringing people in, claiming them as his own, and then showing them what it means to be connected to God. It's about God being physically present among us.

And now it's your turn. What is your story? Who is the saxophone player in your life? The voice in the wilderness. A parent? A friend? A person who put you in your place and rubbed you the wrong way? Why did you show up to worship today? Was it because you were looking for a way to put yourself through torture, or was it because there was something that drew you here? Which person in the crowd are you – are you the one who needs to confess before God, or are you the one who is fascinated by the absurd? Whoever you are, this God who came in human form and stood in line to be baptized, is the same God who spoke through the prophet Isaiah, saying, "I love you, and you are mine. This world is being turned upside down, and I am making you a part of it."

Today we have a different baptism than that of John's – today it's not just a cleansing ritual, but the Holy Spirit comes together with water in order to claim us as God's own and, through it, God reconciles us and promises to be with us and to love us throughout our lives. In baptism, our God plays his song of jazz for us. We hear the song in these waters, but every day God brings us back and teaches us the song again. We will never really make it beyond these waters of baptism, as every day we find ourselves needing to be claimed and renewed and forgiven and taught again by God. But then again, why would we want to go anywhere else? When you fall in love with someone, you don't ever want to leave that place. You want to stay and soak it in and learn everything that you possibly can about them in that moment. And so it is in baptismal waters that we happily remain, because it is here that God makes his love known to you and daily brings you back until you get it. He takes the form of family, friends, and strangers in your life whom you continue to find playing on your street corners until one day you find you love the song and sit down to play duets, inspiring even more to come and join the song.

After all, sometimes you have to watch somebody love something before you can love it yourself. It is as if they are showing you the way. And here, today, God has not just shown you the way, but has created the way for you and put you down right in the middle of it. God has become one of us and lived among us and even died for us in order that we would be able to have faith and to love. You are God's; you are loved; go now and join in the song.
Amen. © 2010