
Behold A New Creation Story

Matthew 3:13-17

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on January 12, 2020 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

Behold. Look. See. Observe. Witness. The call and command to behold is the vocation of Epiphany. Look and see who God is and what God is up to in the person of Jesus. At Christmas we experience the greatest gift, the God who has come to be with us forever. At Epiphany we see Jesus revealed as the true light of the world. During the time after the Epiphany, we learn more and more deeply who the God is who has come to be with us in Jesus. Throughout Epiphany, the light of Jesus shines in order that we can see God for who God really is and so we can be seen for who and whose we really are.

It is fitting that this first Sunday following the Epiphany, we have witnessed 3 children join the family of God through baptism. Beholding this act of grace and the movement of God's Spirit is very much what the time following Epiphany is all about. In looking upon these baptisms, we are learning more about who God is and whose we are. This is true because in our baptisms, we see God as the one who claims us, adopts us as children, and makes us heirs of and participants in God's kingdom through Jesus. In baptism, we are called into a life of the holy pursuit of and obedience to God and God's ways in the world. Because baptism is absolutely personal and entirely communal, God reveals how life with God requires a commitment you alone must finally make but a commitment that you cannot finally make alone. Through the work of the Spirit in the waters of baptism, individuals are joined with the body of Christ who collectively are made into the image and likeness of Jesus, who is the head of the body, the first born of the new creation, the one in whom we live and move and have our being.

The baptisms of these children are not the only baptisms we are encouraged to look upon today. Beholding the story of Jesus' baptism is a prime opportunity for epiphany—for revelation, for God's holy light to shine—for us today. In our Gospel lesson, Matthew tells the story of Jesus coming to be baptized by John at the Jordan river. John the baptizer has been spending time in the wilderness, being the bizarre prophet-type that he was. Perhaps you don't consider a wardrobe of a camel's hair robe and a leather belt and a diet of locust and wild honey bizarre, but it was certainly not the status quo style or cuisine. Yet by his choice of attire and diet, John demonstrated that he was standing in the line of prophets before him, both in word and in action as he proclaimed a message of repentance and preparation for the coming of the Lord.

John had been announcing the coming of One with more power and authority than him, when Jesus comes and joins the line of those awaiting baptism. When his turn comes, Jesus wades into the Jordan, and John beholds him. It's an epiphany for John. Though John seemed not to have known who the one was who would come after him or when that one would come, in this moment John recognizes Jesus as that One who is more powerful, that One who should be doing the baptizing rather than being baptized, that One who is to come. John sees Jesus for who he really is. And though he at first resists Jesus' request to be baptized, he quickly accepts Jesus' response, "For it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (3:15). John surely recognizes Jesus' faithfulness and obedience to the will of God. And while Jesus is more powerful than John, Jesus nevertheless submits to this act of repentance and aligning with the priorities of God and God's kingdom to which John is calling God's people. Regardless of Jesus's need for repentance, he wades into the waters of the Jordan with all those who were committing to turn to God's ways of

justice and righteousness. Jesus wades into the waters in solidarity with all those who desire to turn from their own ways to the ways of God. Jesus wades into the Jordan with all the sinners who long to be saints. And there, John plunges Jesus into the depths of the waters.

As Jesus comes up out of water, the Gospel writer tells the story as if the scene had changed. For those listening to or reading Matthew's story, it's as if the onlookers have been transported from this location in the Judean wilderness to a different time and place. The story as Matthew tells it drips with allusions to the history of God with all people generally and with God's people particularly that reveal more clearly who God is. This scene marked by the waters, God's Spirit, the light of God's revelation, and the voice proclaiming the goodness that God sees takes us right to the beginning of all creation.

Genesis chapter 1 says, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light.' And there was light...

God saw everything that [God] made, and behold, it was very good." (Genesis 1:1-2 and 30) In this moment of Jesus' baptism, we see a new creation story that God is revealing in Jesus. Just as God's Spirit blew over the chaotic waters and brought forth light, God's Spirit comes down on Jesus as he comes out of the waters of baptism and brings light on who Jesus is—God's priceless treasure, God's beloved son. And as God did after each of the days of creation, God says, "Behold, I am well pleased." God says, "Behold, it is very good." Look and see this new creation. Behold, Jesus is the new creation.

Anyone familiar with the story of God and God's people knows that the creation scene is not the only place where God has been at work bringing people through the waters to recreate and start life anew. If you are familiar with the story of scripture, you will surely hear in Matthew's telling of Jesus' baptism the re-creation story of Noah and his ark. God's chosen righteous one, Noah and his family came through the waters that had swallowed the face of the earth. After the rains had stopped, and he had waited for 40 days, Noah sent out a dove to hover and see if the waters had subsided. After several times of Noah sending out the dove for it to return again, the dove found a place to remain. This dove alighting on the drying earth was a sign of God's promised salvation for Noah and his family. God had brought them through the flood, and it was time for creation to be fruitful and multiply once again. Jesus' baptism recalls the story of God's re-creation in Noah's family. The dove alighting on Jesus is a sign of God's promised salvation for God's people and a calling to produce the fruits of God's salvation. Behold, Jesus is God's promised salvation.

Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism becomes more intimate still for God's people. The story moves those with eyes to see from creation and re-creation to the story of God redeeming and rescuing God's people out of their slavery in Egypt. Jesus' baptism recalls the story of how the Israelites escaped from Egypt. God parted the sea and led his people to freedom in the Promised Land. All that held them in slavery was drowned. Even this movement through the waters was a new creation story for God's people. Life beyond slavery and bondage, life in the land God had promised, life made possible by God's act of salvation and rescue... this was the new creation story of the people of Israel, and it is the new creation story happening in Jesus' baptism. Behold, Jesus is the one who rescues and redeems.

Matthew's story of Jesus' baptism sinks deeply into the full story of God's redeeming work from creation, to flood, to rescue from Egypt, and ultimately to the point of bringing the new

creation of justice and righteousness for all the world. As Matthew tells of Jesus' baptism, we can hear coming to life Isaiah's prophecy about God's servant through whom God is doing a new thing. "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations... See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them." (Isaiah 42:1 and 9) As we behold this baptism story, Jesus is revealed as the one who faithfully brings forth justice (42:3), and as the one who "opens the eyes of the blind, brings out prisoners from the dungeon, and from the prison those who sit in darkness" (42:7). Behold, Jesus is the one who fulfills the mission of God's people to be the light of the world and the hope of the nations.

Behold. Look. See. Observe. Witness. The Spirit invites us through the story of Jesus' baptism to see Jesus for who he is and to recognize the story of God's new creation through the Spirit. Like for John, Jesus' baptism becomes an epiphany for us—a revealing of who Jesus really is. The Spirit also invites us through the witnessing of these children's baptisms today to see Jesus for who he is and to recognize the story of God's new creation through the Spirit. In this way, the baptism of these children becomes an epiphany for us—a revealing of who God really is and who they really are. The Spirit also invites us through beholding our own baptismal stories to see Jesus for who he is and to recognize the story of God's new creation through the Spirit. In this way, our own baptisms serve as an epiphany for us—a revealing of who God really is and who we really are.

Yet, I want to be clear about this beholding. We would be foolish to assume that this kind of beholding is a passive act accomplished by a distant and unaffected observer. The beholding to which we are invited where God reveals more of who God is to us is active and participatory. The calling to behold is a calling to participate in Jesus' new creation story. The calling to behold is a calling to participate in the very life Jesus opens to us through the Spirit—a life that reflects Jesus' commitment to the will and way of God: a way marked by justice, and righteousness, and truth. The calling to behold plunges us deep into the waters where life hangs in the balance, precariously relying on God's saving presence. In beholding we sink deep in mercy's sea, where we are redeemed and restored and made new by God's gracious love. When we behold the revelation of God's love for us, we cannot help but be transformed. Hidden in Jesus through the waters of baptism, we hear, "Behold, you are my beloved and priceless children; with you I am well pleased." And God saw all that God created, and behold, it was—it is—very good.

Today the Spirit of God calls us to the participatory activity of beholding. We behold with our eyes, ears, and mouths; with our fingers, feet, and faces; with our hearts, minds, and spirits. This is to say, we behold with all of who we are because we have been claimed fully by God and have given ourselves fully to Christ. So I invite you this morning to come to the waters with all of who you are, and to remember you have been claimed by God and have committed to the calling of Jesus. And if you are for the first time recognizing that God is claiming you as God's own and you are ready to commit to God's will and the way of Jesus, I invite you to come to the waters as well. The waters of new creation and new life in Jesus are open to everyone. These waters are for all hopeful sinners and for all failing saints. These waters are for you, and they are for me.

At each of the main exits this morning, there are bowls of water. And of course, there is water in the font here in the crossing. As you leave today, I invite you to go to the waters, touch them, and remember your calling to behold. For you whom the Spirit has joined with Jesus, use this touch to remember your calling, your covenant, and the new creation God is making in and through you. Remember the promises that God and God's people have made to you and that you

have made to God and God's people. For you who yet long to be joined with Jesus and his family on earth and in heaven, touch the waters to realize that God's abundant grace is for you. Touch the waters to know you are welcome to join the community of those who behold and are made new. Touch the waters to experience the invitation of the community who hears the voice of the Lord as it yet again proclaims, "Behold, very good." So come to the waters all of you, and behold this new creation story for you. Amen.