

**PRACTICING DISCERNMENT: SIGNS FROM GOD**  
**MATTHEW 3:13-17**  
**JANUARY 13, 2008 – BAPTISM OF JESUS**  
**THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

We are talking these weeks about practicing discernment. Last week we talked about common sense. I said common sense is where we start. Much discernment in religious life and experience is built on common sense, the horizontal plane of discernment.

The greatest commandment to love God and neighbor has the ring of common sense. Our faith isn't about becoming meditating recluses but being at work in the world in practical, common sense ways feeding the hungry, clothing the naked.

Today, I'd like to talk about signs from God—the vertical plane of discernment. Discerning God's will occurs in the horizontal and vertical dimensions. I dare say Presbyterians are more comfortable in the horizontal dimension. But if we do not open ourselves to God's vertical signals we operate with only half our listening power.

The Scripture today says: “the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’”

These signs from above identified Jesus' special relationship to God and announced his impending ministry. Whatever else happened in the Jordan that day the communication clearly came from another realm.

It reminds me of Pascal's encounter in the vertical plane in the wee hours one morning: “Not the God of the philosophers, but the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Fire! Fire! Fire!”<sup>i</sup> Or Emerson's: “I fancied the oracles were all silent, and nature had spent her fires; and behold! All night from every pore, these fine auroras have been streaming.”<sup>ii</sup>

I want to focus today on the larger meaning of Jesus' baptism: God's initiative to enter the sphere of the everyday, to communicate with us and to guide our lives and ministry.

These signs, from opening heavens to descending dove to the voice, culminate in a sense of God's will for Jesus. God communicates heavenly meanings in and through an earthly realm. No one was there but my sense is God was palpably present to Jesus in a way others nearby may not have even noticed.

A colleague, an excellent preacher, makes the same point. He says anything of value that gets communicated in his preaching and the congregation's listening happens by God's revelation. Even the worst sermons can convey the clearest message if God wants someone to get it.

This is not to say we sit by passively while God opens the heavens to us. Rather being open to and preparing ourselves for holy encounters is an important part of the process.

Looking for God in the everyday is not unlike looking out of the corner of your eye or standing at the prow of a ship scanning the horizon.

No formulas guarantee we will discern with certainty God's will for us but there is a posture we can take to be spiritually receptive.

Let's look more closely at this morning's story: "The heavens were opened to Jesus" says Matthew which unless I miss my guess is where it starts with us too. Some person or event is "heaven sent," we receive good news or good fortune like "manna from heaven."

To say the heavens opened is to say that the old world, where heaven is closed, the world where possibility or promise seems depleted changes fundamentally. Opening the heavens is language for "adds a new dimension to our experience." We see things differently.

I suspect sometimes we have drubbed wonder out of our lives. Everything has an explanation, a reason, a cause. I heard a wonderful talk the other day at the Garret Club on Emily Dickinson. Professor Chris Miller said Dickinson did not deaden her senses as many of us do to deal with life. Rather she let the fullness of each day speak to her so she could experience something so subtle as the slant of light on a winter day with awe and amazement.

Matthew says, "The Spirit of God descended like a dove alighted on him." Genesis talks about the Spirit of God hovering over the waters. The sense here is the same. God's Spirit/energy blessing Jesus; giving Jesus power.

John said he baptized with water and Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. It was fire that touched him that day and touches us says Matthew.

The Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit is that singular resolve to work toward or pursue something others would never think of or consider foolish. Noah building the ark; Moses leading God's people through the wilderness; St. Paul enduring treacherous conditions founding church after church in far off places—driven all of them by the fire of the Spirit.

Finally, there was a voice from above which said "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

What that voice does is confirm for Jesus that there is not just a God out there somewhere but that this God knew and cared for him personally. This is the personal assurance and relationship that enables people to persevere under the most difficult circumstances. The world may be falling apart but God is my refuge.

St. Paul said, "if God is for us who can be against us." We may face disappointment or loss but the fact that the Sovereign of Life considers me his son changes everything. Where I felt powerless or helpless now I have confidence that God and I can work out any situation or challenge I face.

Perhaps one of the greatest obstacles to discerning God's purpose and direction for our lives is that we tend to remain mostly in the horizontal plane. We don't expect holy encounters, the veil of new possibility to be torn back, or hear any voice claiming us.

I say we can position ourselves for such encounters, be open to and ready for them. But my experience and observation is that such encounters come only when we give up control and surrender.

Total surrender. Clearing my mind of any expectations for what God will do for me invariably gets my heart and head in the right place.

Ultimately, I believe we are wired to receive God's signals but sometimes we just don't turn on our receivers. Surely God can and does get our attention, sometimes in painful ways—a crisis or turn of events that renders us helpless. I've been there too.

Yet, I believe it is possible to be open to and receive God's signs even with no crisis pending. In fact, sometimes I think we make it all more complicated than it needs to be.

At one time in my life I remember getting through to God or God's getting through to me became a complicated ritual of reading, meditation, journaling, visiting various monasteries and seeking out those whom I thought held the secret if they would only share it with me.

But I am reminded that a simple, genuine, one word prayer, "please" can be enough. Which is exactly what one colleague said at a time in his life when things were not especially good or bad but something he knew in his heart was missing.

It was in the stillness of a summer afternoon, lying on his back in his father's apple orchard, sun in his eyes he made that one word prayer. He said he doesn't know how much time elapsed but then he heard, as if he'd been waiting for it all along, two branches strike together in the wind. "Clack, clack."

Maybe all his journeying was to bring him to that moment he said only to hear two branches hit each other twice; to see nothing cross the threshold but to see the threshold, to hear the dry clack-clack of the world's tongue, he said, at the approach of the approach of splendor.<sup>iii</sup>

What if the gospel is not so much a technique for getting something else, but rather an encounter with something else? What if the Christian faith is mainly a matter of being met by the risen Christ?<sup>iv</sup>

In my experience that encounter brings joy or peace but can also bring a profound sense of dislocation or pain. Yet, the encounter itself is what opens us up and deepens us for the indwelling of God's Spirit. If just that can happen, if God's Spirit can find residence in our hearts for even a moment our lives can set out in a new direction for a new land.

What if the Christian faith is not a means of our getting what we want from God but rather what happens in us when God gets what God wants from us—our attention, our devotion, our lives?

On the one hand I believe we long for such an encounter but it can also be terrifying. We are here week after week perhaps with ambiguous feelings: hoping we find God but hoping we don't too because the cost or demands on us could be too great.

Yet, perhaps Jesus' baptism today tells us we can approach an encounter with God not because it won't be costly but because it won't destroy us. Rather we will be transformed and made whole.

Such holy encounters transcend everything we possess and make all that we cherish more cherishable than we realized because we see it as coming from God's abundance. Simple things, I mean: the day, a meal, time with a friend, the slant of light on a winter afternoon, the clack-clack of two branches.

Being open to, living in, encountering God in the vertical dimension is what Jesus' baptism was about and I believe what God wants for each of us.

It is what all this is for and why we're here. It is also what our new elders and deacons are committing themselves to today to help us do more effectively together.

That's the message this morning: going deeper, being met by God what ever our circumstances, seeing perhaps for the first time in a long time, in this fractious, fractured world endless possibility and hope. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> William Willimon, *Journal for Preachers*, January-March 2008.

<sup>ii</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," from *Essays and Other Writings* (New York: Everman Library)

<sup>iii</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Alphabet of Grace* (New York: Seabury Press, 1991) 6.

<sup>iv</sup> Willimon, *Journal for Preachers*, January – March 2008.