

EPIPHANY 1, Jan. 8, 2017, Year A

"... suddenly the heavens were opened..." (from Matthew 3:13-17)

- During every Advent, we have two Sundays on which we hear about John the Baptizer, and his ministry at the Jordan. In Advent, John's rugged presence and prophetic ministry stand out, and he can be intimidating! Today, the focus is on the *hopeful* aspect of John's ministry ~ his Baptism of Jesus. We have no *positive* knowledge that John the Baptizer ever turned anyone away. We can guess that some left angry. *For with strong words*, he challenged those who came to him. Yet John's purpose was *not* to make people feel *smaller*. *Instead*, he wanted them to discover something *much bigger*. *John pushed and pulled anyone who might listen, to see more and hear more*. Indeed, not only to see and hear, but also *to embrace someone* who might end up turning the whole world *upside down!* If we listen to John, we will be pushed and pulled, as well. *His words and actions present us with the same opportunity to have our whole world turned upside down ~ or, actually, to have it turned right-side up!*
- Keeping in mind the *character* of John's ministry at the Jordan, we can consider Peter's words in our reading from Acts.¹ Peter says, "... that God shows no *partiality*, but in every nation anyone who fears him, and does what is right, is acceptable to him." At first, we may be tempted to take his words out of context. *For it might sound like Peter is saying that fearing God, and doing what is right, are the two things that make us acceptable to God.* But that is *not* really his point. He has in mind the *gracious, universal* scope of God's mission, to *all* people and *not just to Israel*. Peter speaks these words while visiting the home of a *gentile*, Cornelius, who has seen an angel. This prompts Peter to share the foundation of his faith. It centers on *God's message* concerning Jesus, who he says is "Lord of all." Peter then says, that "*everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.*" This helps us notice something important. Doing what is right *does please* God, and *fits with* being acceptable to God. Yet, *forgiveness of sins, and reconciliation with God, amount to something more, beyond being merely 'acceptable' to God.* For, as Peter says, this Jesus who was anointed with the Holy Spirit "was ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead." *This has to do with 'living' and with 'dying.'*

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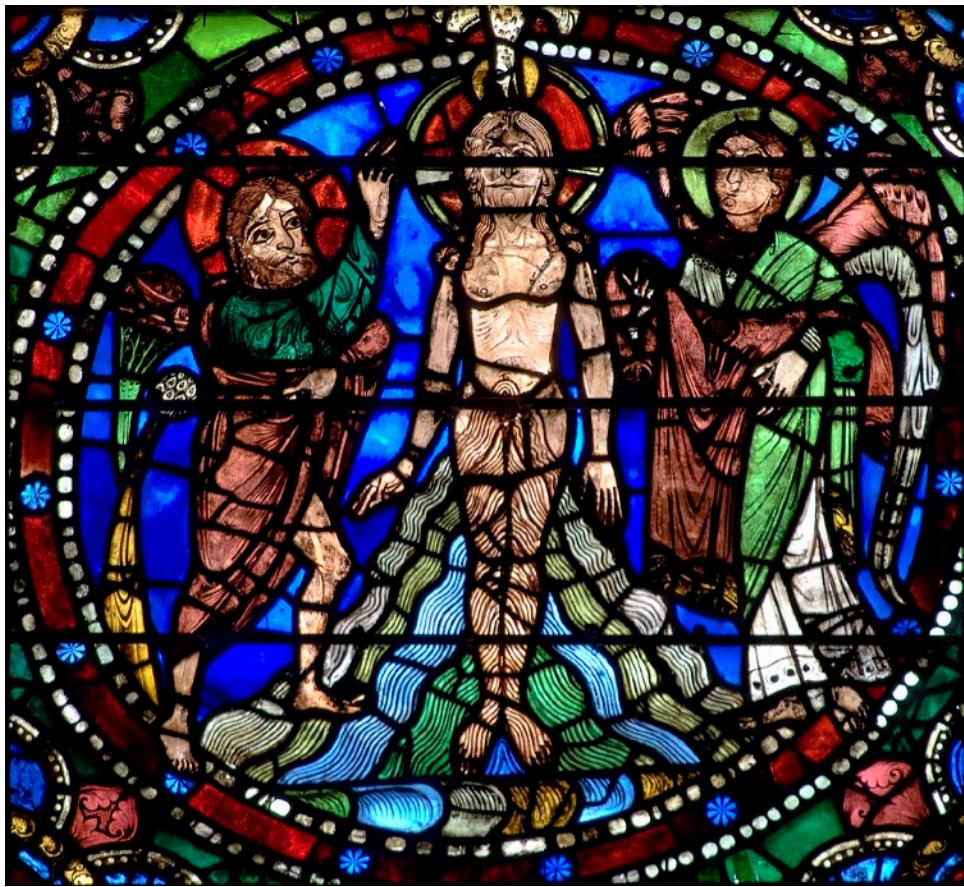
- *The question, then, is not so much about whether those who do good are acceptable to God.* The more significant question moves in the *opposite direction.* It has to do with *the way* this new universal ‘message’ of God is *significant for those who try to do good, and for those who never do good.*
- Not everyone meets the Messiah or hears the Gospel during their lives in this world. Yet, regardless of whether *in this life* we *meet* him, *see* him or *love* him, *all of us* will meet him in the next, ‘on the other side.’ That meeting, following Peter’s way of speaking about it, is often called the *Last Judgment*. But, as I like to say, it can also be called the *‘Last Affirmation,’* a moment when we can *affirm* him, and he us.² And so, even if—*in this life*—we have only *glimpsed* him, or have only seen him *partially* and *imperfectly*, we surely *will see him clearly* on the other side. In that moment, we *will be able* to acknowledge that, *at last*, we have *seen* the Messiah. To *know* that we are *seeing* him, is to recognize that we *can believe* in him. Surely we have faith in the converting power of his *revealed presence*. When the glory of God’s Messiah is fully revealed, I wonder how anyone could resist his *beauty*, his *goodness*, and the power of his *truth*.³
- As Matthew suggests in his description of the Baptism of Jesus, *at that moment the heavens were opened.* The perceived divide between God and Creation, between the realm of angels and the realm of people, was bridged. Yet, *not all see* the glory of God descending like a dove and alighting on Jesus. *Not all hear* the voice from heaven say, “This is my Son, *the Beloved*, with whom I am well pleased.” Part of the reason for this lies in our fallen nature. As Paul says, in one his foundational statements in Romans, “for all have sinned, and [all] fall short of the glory of God.”⁴ We *all fall short of the glory of God!* We see and hear one another *imperfectly*. If that is the case, then it’s even more true concerning our perception of the glory of God as revealed to us. And so we *fail to embrace fully* the One who gives himself into our hands!
- For what if we *did see* God’s glory *clearly*? What if we *truly heard* God’s words? Who could resist living as a faithful witness? Yet, even if we aren’t able to now, at some point, we *will see*, and we *will hear*, and be able to embrace the

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fullness of what has been given to us. We also know others seek to see and hear, as well. And we are called to share the message of the Messiah as we take part in the *continuing* vocation of the Servant.

- The vocation of Jesus as the Messiah was revealed at many times and places. A major occasion, of course, was on the banks of the Jordan, through the ministry of John. Jesus' vocation was not a *private* one, relevant only to himself. His vocation also had, and still has, a *shared* dimension. This is why we have one of the Servant passages from Isaiah this morning.⁵ Of course, we think of Jesus when we hear Isaiah's words. But it's important to remember that these same words from Isaiah first had an *earlier significance* for hearers, several hundred years before John appeared at the Jordan River. Isaiah may have been speaking about the vocation of the prophet, and he may have been referring to the vocation of Israel. But either way, the *full* significance of Isaiah's words was *not apparent until* they were later embodied in the ministry and suffering of the Messiah. We know that when we are baptized, we are baptized into his death and resurrection. As we receive this sacrament, we are given a share in Jesus' continuing servant vocation, to be a light to the nations. The light is his. But, now, it is shared with others, through us. Beginning today, this light will be shared with the world around us through Xander Fredlund.
- And so, *there is always hope* ~ hope that we will see more, hear more, and perceive more. We live in hope that others will join us. And join us as we embrace the joyful Gift of messianic reconciliation, which has been given to us.
- Once again, I quote St. Richard of Chichester: "Day by day, dear Lord, of thee three things I pray: to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly, day by day."⁶ And so, also for others, dear Lord, we pray day by day: we pray that they might see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, and follow thee more nearly, day by day.

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Chartres Cathedral, Baptism of Christ window, 12th Century

Father in heaven, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen. [Collect for the feast of The Baptism of Christ]

Here is my servant (*Xander / you / me*), 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...
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind... (Isaiah 42:1ff)

Today through Baptism, Alexander (Xander) Fredlund is incorporated into ‘the Tree of Jesse,’ into God’s Kingdom and the Body of Christ, and into the vocation of the Messiah.

Matthew 3:13-17

Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. 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. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Notes:

¹ See Acts 10:34-43 in context.

² In part, I have in mind here the words of Charles Wesley, from his hymn, “Lo! he comes with clouds descending,” based on words and imagery from the Revelation to John. Verse 2 begins with these words: “Every eye shall now behold him, robed in dreadful majesty...” [see Hymn 57, *The Hymnal 1982*.] I also have in mind C.S. Lewis’ idea that, at this moment [Last Judgement / Last Affirmation], the Lord does not overturn our willed disposition, but instead confirms it, thereby respecting our freedom, that quality within us that mirrors the glory of the divine being.

³ I assume that this is a statement that can jointly be affirmed by Christians and Jews, allowing for differences about when this revelation occurs.

⁴ Romans 3:23.

⁵ See Isaiah 42:1-9

⁶ Words perhaps more familiar to some of us through the Broadway musical, *Godspell*. As quoted in Hymn 654, *The Hymnal 1982*. St. Richard lived from 1197 until 1253, having been born around the time that the basic structure of Chartres Cathedral was being completed in the near-miraculous timeframe of roughly 25 years.