



HOLY CROSS LUTHERAN CHURCH

Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin



WORSHIP SERVICE FOR JANUARY 8, 2023

Preacher: Pr. Andy Feters

Reading: Matthew 3:1-17

“Turning Point”

Early in our marriage, my wife Becky and I had one car. This was around 2008 or so. We were living in New York, which meant we shared the car. I remember we had just renewed our Costco membership and had purchased a new GPS (remember those things?). Now this GPS was fancy, in that, you could change the voice settings on the robot giving you directions. One morning Becky and I were set to run some errands. I was driving and we get in the car in our drive way and the GPS voice setting is now a man's voice. The voice telling us the next steps for our journey ahead. My wife, in her curiosity, asks me why the voice of the GPS was changed to be a man's voice and I look at her gently and say; It's so I can tell the difference between this person telling me where to go and this person telling me where to go.

This was a turning point in our life together.

We can name lots of turning points in our lives. I will always remember when I called my parents to tell them the good news of expecting our first child, who will become known as Charlie. My father yelled across the room to my mother who was on the phone with us...“Your life will never be the same.” We all have these turning points happen; new job or the loss of job, entering or graduating from education, getting married or going through divorce. Even as I name these things you can think of things in your life that are turning points.

And turning points happen to us collectively as well; as a nation with 9/11 or January 6th. As a congregation either losing a pastor or having a new pastor start.

Turning points are ways in which we mark transition from one reality to a new reality. Today we celebrate the baptism of Jesus from the gospel of Matthew. Matthew shares this turning point of Jesus with his own baptism by his cousin John. Matthew harkens back to the prophet Isaiah using those familiar words “He is a voice shouting in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord's coming! Clear the road for him!’”

To his very Jewish converts of Jesus' followers, Matthew's audience would hear this as he intends us to hear it; the Lord has prepared a way to get from here to there. John is preparing a way for Jesus, and Jesus will prepare a way for all of us.

And so those first words of John “Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.” That word “repent” in Greek is metanoia....a literal turning around...a course correction...or maybe translated as a turning point but is too often heard as a condemnation. You do wrong, change your ways. Let us this morning rather hear it as an invitation to something new. John follows those words of turning to Jesus himself....the kingdom of heaven is here. We just celebrated that Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, Matthew is about to tell us the depth of what that means. When this child came into the world, he will grant us new life, not in the afterlife, but right here, right now.

Baptism for us, is not only connected to Jesus’ death and resurrection, but intimately connected to Jesus’ life, teachings, healings, miracles, and embodiment of the kingdom of heaven. So baptism is a turning point in our life of God’s promise that we are marked as a child of God. And what we do in worship is specifically linked to this turning point into our lives. Confession and forgiveness is acknowledging that we are living one way and need a reorientation to the kingdom of heaven. In Holy Communion we are invited to experience the Kingdom of God ... come near to us in bread and fruits of the vine....a reminder that this is for you. In the sharing of the peace we embrace the communal celebration of the peace that only God can give. Even the sending of our worship service is connected to this turning point of baptism...Jesus said I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will carry this light with them. We are sent to share with the world what God is doing in and through us...an invitation to the world around us to experience the kingdom of heaven come here, right here, right now.

What this means for us is that the only identity that is important to us is found in baptism as a child of God. But there is a catch; other identities that we claim and others that are given to us compete with this identity. The religious authorities of the time were confronted by John for this very reason. “Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. Don’t just say to each other, ‘We’re safe, for we are descendants of Abraham.’ That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones.”

The Pharisees and the Sadducees felt safe because their identity was found in Abraham’s promise. John’s challenge then comes to a head not because they name this as their identity but in the same way we might claim being baptized. John’s claim is that this identity need be a constant challenge of how we are living out the promises God has blessed us with. Months ago we heard those words of the prophet Micah: With what shall I come before the Lord ... sacrifices? Micah instructed the people as John does now; to do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God. This ought to sound familiar as it is the foundation of our own mission statement: growing disciples across all generations, welcome with love, and serve humbly with God .

It is not enough to stay put. Jesus' baptism by John is an invitation to grow in relationship with God....to deepen our understanding of the way of Jesus, and to lean on the power of the Holy Spirit when we feel lost and the pathway seems unclear.

When Jesus comes out of the powerful waters of baptism God proclaims from heaven; "This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy." Those same words are proclaimed to the baptized....this is my loved child, who brings me great joy.

We should notice that Jesus does not say thanks dad and do nothing. No this turning point in the gospel is a turning point for Jesus' ministry.

It is from this turning point that the work of the kingdom of heaven begins.

It is from this turning point that lives will be changed.

It is from this turning point that the deaf will hear, the blind will see, and the hurting will be healed.

It is from this turning point that Jesus will call his followers to a life of transformation.

It is from this turning point the empires of this world will be confronted by empire in heaven.

It is from this turning point that love will be poured out into the world from the cross.

And it is from this turning point that hope will be found in an empty tomb.

The turning point begun in the waters of the Jordan River have made their way to our own invitation today.

We keep the baptismal font out as a constant invitation to remember our identity is found in Jesus' life, teachings, healings, death and resurrection as a child of God. And that each time we come to it will be a turning point for us to work for the kingdom of heaven.

Here is our entry into new life. Here is our turning point in the life God has in store for us different from the life we find ourselves living. Here is where we hear God's promise "this is my beloved child, who brings me great joy." Here is where we get to work to grow disciples across all generations, welcome with love, and serve humbly with God." Amen!

Prayers of Intercession

Jesus, Lord of righteousness, you came preaching a message of love and baptizing with Spirit and fire. Baptize us with your fire, and alight in us your Holy Spirit. Lord, in your mercy.

Hear our prayer.

Water and word come together to open the heavens to all who follow you. Teach us to care for the waters of the earth, as well as our words. Lord, in your mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

Pour your blessings upon all who have received your Holy Spirit in baptism. Welcome into your heavenly kingdom all who come to you. Lord, in your mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

Pour your healing waters upon all who suffer in body, mind or spirit especially John F. who has pneumonia, Gary S., Bill, Archer, Sean, Peter, Tad, Mark and Tim. We pray for those who are in hospice: Barb, Cheri and John. We remember the family and friends of Gary who passed away, Harvey as he mourns the loss of his son-in-law Mark and Kim as she mourns the death of her cousin, Nathan. We pray for Jan and George who were hospitalized due to a reckless car accident on their way to church, and the loss of their son Craig who was killed. Craig was part of our Definitely Abled Fellowship Program. Lord, in your mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

Remind us that there are some in our world who have not yet heard your word of love and forgiveness. Show us how we might reach those little ones so all may know you. Lord, in your mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

With all the saints we celebrate Jesus' baptism, and the gifts his baptism bestows on the world. Lord in your mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

Confident in God's gracious care and love, we pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our redeeming Lord. Amen.