



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“The Risen Sun, Too Bright for our Losing Eyes.”

Matthew 3:37-43

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January 12, 2014

May the words of my mouth...

"Lord I want to be a Christian in my heart, mmmmmmm."

Happy new year folks. I am sorry I missed you last week, the first Sunday of the new year, but had I been here, and you had the chance to hear me preach last week, in addition to struggling to hear me at all, you would have wondered who asked the Godfather to lead worship.

Did you make any New Years resolutions this year, decisions to make changes, having looked forward and backward, decided to give more concrete expressions to the desires of your heart for the life you long to live.

Although I was not able to be here last week, I was able to sit at home and look at the scriptures coming up in the next few weeks as we move beyond the season of Christmas, past Epiphany and into the season in which we follow the story of Jesus, calling the first disciples, and teaching them the core teachings of this way, this gospel way of radical love, this way of being at one with God and with the universe, living a life that is right- not right as in, never wrong, but right in the way that a boat is right- not upside down or healed over but right, plumb, true, in balance with everything around. This is the gospel way of love and in the next few weeks we follow Jesus through the core teachings found in Matthew's gospel and he applies them to real life situations.

And that is what put that old African American spiritual in mind this week. "Lord I want to be a Christian in my heart, mmmmmmm." It is a statement of yearning, a New Years resolution at its best. Holy One, the deep desire of my heart is to be a life expression of the gospel way of Jesus- to live in tune with God and the universe, in the way that Jesus did. And what better place to try to connect with that yearning than Jesus' baptism.

Here we are in the second week of January, the celebration of Jesus' birth is just behind us and in our gospel reading already he is 30 years old. They grow up so quickly don't they.

Jesus has headed down to the Jordan River where his cousin is receiving people of all kinds, crowds of people who long for life to be different, long for the messiah to come and turn their world around, long for a sense that their life matters, means something, that they are more than pawns in the hands of dictators like Herod or Caesar. And here is Jesus among the throng, normal as can be. But John hesitates to baptize him. This is no normal situation, but Jesus disagrees. No John, baptize me just like everybody else. That is the way to fulfill all righteousness- this is the right and proper way to proceed. Business as usual.

But then as he is coming up out of the water, something unusual. Matthew's gospel uniquely states, "Heaven opened to him. And the Spirit rested on him., and a voice blessed him." What a fascinating phrase: heaven opened to him." What was that?

If you can set aside any interpretation of the word "heaven" as a place at all, let go of the picture of the sky opening, the clouds parting, and allow yourself to think of heaven as a state of being utterly at one with your maker at one with the Spirit at the heart of all creation, then how might that have been for Jesus, to have heaven open to him- to have that state of being utterly at one with God open to him in the midst of life. Needless to say, Jesus knows that from this point on, things will be different. It will not be normal, business as usual.

While I was keeping a low profile and trying not to talk over the Christmas season I read a book that I think is one of the best books I have read in many years. It is our book club book for February by John Green called, "The Fault in our Stars." It is the charming, heart breaking, heart warming, funny and beautiful story of some teen agers who have terminal cancer. Somehow John Green gets into the heads of these young people in a way that feels authentic and true.

This book deals with all the grimy, hormonal, angst-ridden honest and eternal stuff of life lived far too quickly. These kids have to figure out stuff far too soon. And at one point Augustus and Hazel, the two main characters are having a conversation and,

"Out of nowhere Augustus asked, "Do you believe in an afterlife?"

"I think forever is an incorrect concept."

He smirked. "You're an incorrect concept."

"I know. That's why I'm being taken out of the rotation."

"That's not funny," he said, looking at the street. Two girls passed on a bike, one riding side-saddle over the back wheel.

"Come on," I said. "That was a joke."

"The thought of you being removed from the rotation is not funny to me," he said.

"Seriously, though: afterlife."

"No," I said, and then revised. "Well, maybe I wouldn't go so far as no. You?"

"Yes," he said, his voice full of confidence. "Yes, absolutely. Not like a heaven where you ride unicorns, play harps, and live in a mansion made of clouds. But yes, I believe in Something with a capital S. Always have."

"Really?" I asked. I was surprised. I'd always associated belief in heaven with, frankly, a kind of intellectual disengagement. But Gus wasn't dumb.

"Yeah," he said quietly. "I believe in that line from "An Imperial Affliction." "The risen sun too bright in her losing eyes." That's God, I think, the rising sun, and the light is too bright and her eyes are losing but they aren't lost. I don't believe we return to haunt or comfort the living or anything, but I think something becomes of us.

Something with a capital S. Something, not just in a life after we die, but Something in a way that death cannot touch. "The risen sun too bright in her losing eyes." And the in-breaking word at Jesus' baptism is that you are Something now. "Heaven opened to him." The Something greater, deeper, mysterious and real is not reserved for the mysterious time beyond the veil, but heaven breaks into this moment, and it does so with a message, "You are my beloved. In you I am well pleased." Heaven opens, not some place with unicorns dancing on clouds with harps, another shining angel in a star studded sky, deadly boring as cotton candy, but that heaven, that state of being at one, utterly in tune with Something with a capital S, Life with a capital L, Soul with a capital S, God with a capital G. The risen sun, too bright for our losing eyes shines in this moment, in this day, on this people gathered, on every moment, poignant and rare, or commonplace and dull as dishwater.

"God I want to be a Christian in my heart, mmmmm". And the mmmmm part of that lyric is the most important part because it interprets the preceding sentence. God I want to be a Christian mmmmm,, not in some trivial way, like I become a member of a club, or like I have separated myself out of some sense of rightness, but in a deep sense which unites me with You and with the universe. In my heart, in my inmost being. I want to be at one with Something with a capital S, and to live my life from there, within the light of the risen sun too bright for my losing eyes.

Heaven. Open. Now. Phew. That is not exactly a resolution, but it is a yearning, and that will do, for 2014.
Amen.