

**I WAS DEAD, AND SEE, I AM ALIVE FOR EVERMORE; MATTHEW 3: 13-17; JANUARY 8, 2017;
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This is Epiphany Sunday, the celebration of the revealing of salvation to the world, when the words of Simeon, “Now let thy servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen thy salvation,” are taken out of the narrow confines of the Jewish temple and manifest to the whole world as Jesus’ public life begins with his baptism by John in the Jordan River. Wondrous accounts and yet mundane accounts—the humdrum presentation of an infant in the temple and the ordinary baptism of a man in a nondescript rural area along a river. But, oh, so much more. What we are celebrating today is the proclamation that our everyday reality is suffused with so much more than the temporal and the quotidian. And in this story of Jesus’ baptism, we can see the realm of our physical senses being complemented and completed by the realm beyond our senses, and when the seen and the unseen befriend each other, our vision and understanding of reality becomes clearer.

I am sorry to be so vague and wordy, but my vagueness is deliberate because our temperaments, personalities, life experiences, ages, intellects, tastes and cultures are so different that how we experience the intersection of sense and feeling, spirit and matter, heaven and earth—see, all of these words that are straining to capture the essence that is beyond words—our personhoods are so different that we gain glimpses of the wholeness of life in very different ways. But so many people testify to the personal experience of an epiphany—to a breaking in on ordinary consciousness of an awareness of the connectedness and goodness and meaningfulness of the world—that it takes a stubborn ideologue to deny the reality of

these religious experiences. And for so many, these experiences are self-defined as an encounter with God, a God whose image is, in some fathomless way, like the face of Jesus Christ. This is what we celebrate on Epiphany Sunday.

Many of you have stories you could tell, and many have stories you won't tell about personal experiences that keep your faith alive, for these encounters are always personal. Here's one. Almost twenty years ago, I was doing a little research in the archives of the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London on the life of Eric Liddell, the Scots runner made famous by the movie, *Chariots of Fire*. He intrigued me because I knew he had died in a Japanese internment camp during the Second World War. By all accounts, he was a good man, and I was hungry for accounts of people of faith in the twentieth century who had behaved as if the Christian faith was a living truth. You don't have to do much historical study before you can get discouraged with Christians and the church. I was reading through an archive box of personal information about Eric Liddell, and I had spread out over two spots like a good American, when an elderly gentleman asked to sit down beside me. A little irritated, I move all of my materials into what was now a cramped little space, and he sat down with a smile and asked, "What are you doing?" I thought, "Oh no, he's chatty. How am I going to get out of this?" I replied, "Just doing some research." He responded, "On what?" I could see that he was looking at my papers, and I didn't want to get into a conversation about whether he liked the *Chariots of Fire* movie. So I said I was doing a little work on Eric Liddell, and he said, "Oh, I know more about him than anyone alive." It turns out he was Norman Cliff, Liddell's young assistant in the internment camp, having been captured himself just before he was to have left

for Oxford. That encounter eventually opened up a whole new avenue for me, and in unexpected and meandering ways, it has brought me here today. All because of that piercing question, “What are you doing?” That day, Norman Cliff’s embodied voice was the voice of God speaking into my life.

Now, come on, your ever-watchful intellect replies, surely words mean what they mean and it is dangerous to suggest that everyday encounters point to something more than themselves. This is just opening the door to crazy people. Things are what they are, and no more. Really? Aren’t there many examples of simple words that carry an ordinary message and that also carry something “more,” a larger, more meaningful “more?” Take, as an example, African-American spirituals. These are songs of longing to escape the hardships of this world for the joys of heaven. Just listen to the words printed in your bulletin:

Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus.
Steal away, steal away home.
I ain't got long to stay here.

Deep river, my home is over Jordan
Deep river, Lord, I want to cross over into camp-ground.
Oh, don't you want to go to that gospel feast,
That promised land where all is peace?
Oh, deep river, Lord, I want to cross over into camp-ground.

But don’t these songs of deliverance mean more than an escapist desire for bliss? Yes, they do, they are resistance songs of earthly escape, songs of the underground railroad. To steal away home is to flee north. The deep river is not the Jordan River in Palestine, but the Ohio River between Kentucky and Ohio, and, after the Fugitive Slave Act of 1851, the Niagara River. Campground is Canada, where the good news is freedom and peace. Are these NOT songs of

heaven? Yes, they are still songs of heavenly hope, but they are no less songs of temporal deliverance. These songs unite heaven and earth in their double coding. Once these connections are noted, they are obvious. My point is that their double coding is not unusual. If you look for it, you discover that double meaning is all around you.

And that brings us to our gospel lesson. A man is in line to be baptized by John in the Jordan, one of many. It was an ordinary baptism, and on your bulletin's cover you can see another man preparing to be baptized while in the background is the ordinary countryside and a small city—the humdrum quality of the scene is emphasized by the artist Piero della Francesca's use of his own Tuscan town of Borgo San Sepolcro. Imagine if you were in line; you wouldn't know that something was happening that was changing history. Much of the scene is horizontal and this-worldly: the movement in the fields, the meandering Jordan River, and on this plane, crossing the Jordan means just that—fording a small, insignificant stream. But something unseen is also happening: John the Baptist senses it, initially refusing to baptize this man Jesus, because the ordinary actions of baptism should not apply to the extraordinary person in front of him who, with his luminescence, seems not to quite fit in. But Jesus informs John that, "It is proper to fulfill all righteousness." What does he mean? He means that he will participate in the ordinary forms of life and the ordinary is to be blessed and acknowledged as good by his participation in them. He will not be exempted from ordinariness by his exalted status. It is one of the many times Jesus will pronounce a divine "yes" on the kinds of activities we do every day. And so John agrees to baptize him, but you can see his reluctance in his ever-so-careful pouring of the baptismal water and the tension in his left hand. Why, even the three angels are tense and

reluctant—something new is making its appearance, and they are nervous about how things might work out. An epiphany is happening.

And so it is, for look at the vertical line in this mathematically precise painting. The divine in the form of a dove is breaking in on the world she so precisely and rationally created, proclaiming that there is more to the universe than what we see or experience through our five senses, and that the creator has chosen to reveal that world and bring us into that larger reality through the coming of the beloved son, in whom he is well pleased.

This passage gives us a multi-layered meaningful world in which to live, and invites us every day to be watchful for the larger meanings all around us. And you don't have to be very good at this to at least start noticing things. Remember how reluctant John the Baptist was to cooperate with Jesus. You don't have to have any theology about this or any well-defined theories; just live your life--the good parts, the bad parts, the ugly parts--and be attentive to how God can make a larger pattern of meaning come out of it. Be looking for epiphany.

This is what it means to be alive to God, for remember, this Jesus who presented himself for an ordinary baptism, was dead, and see, he is alive for evermore. Watch for him, and sometimes, out of the corner of your eye, you'll glimpse his movements. And those glimpses will sustain your spirit as you try to weekly live out the teachings of Christ. For without the reassurance of the descending dove, in whatever manner that makes sense to you, you will grow weary in well-doing. You will burn out. If you're like me, you come to Westminster every week to be

reminded that God is alive in your life and in the world, and sometimes, in this very place, you see him, and, just for a moment, he unites your daily existence with the frissoned dance of the universe. A veil has been pulled back, and more life has been revealed. That's an epiphany.

Amen.