

"Pivotal Moments" based on Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
Aspen Community UMC
January 10, 2010

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The scripture reading from Luke:

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'



I am calling this message "Pivotal Moments" because of two things - significant things - that I would like for you to remember – about John and about the baptism of Jesus.

Pivotal – what does it mean?

A few things – a point on the end of which something rests or turns

A place of movement and change of direction

A pivot is a turn in skiing?

Who can tell us about that?

And then don't you need to go on ahead?

For if even your hand lingers behind you it can throw off your movement.

After this *pivotal moment* Jesus moves on to contemplation and action in his ministry.

A couple of *pivotal movements* exist in today's reading:

The first one has to do with John.

John lead people to believe that a new era was about to be ushered in -
and it might be the hope of Israel.

I guess you would call him a visionary.

And - he told them that he was not the person they were waiting for.

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But - John was doing something different – and you don't hear about it until you study some of the writings of the early Jewish Christian movement.



There was great deal of diversity in Judaism - in religious practice at that time.

There may have been more diversity than there is now.

John was part of a group called the Essenes.

What do we know about them?

The Essenes are mentioned by several ancient writers including Josephus and Philo.

There are a number of sources that tell us about them.

We know they lived communally. They shared their property. And they were vegetarian.

Does anyone have a thought about how this would make them different from mainstream religion – mainstream Judaism?

Anyone have an idea what it was?

John comes to the river.

And what does he say? We did not read these words today but they are well-known.

He says to repent and be baptized.

Repent and be baptized to forgive your sins.

We cannot know for sure – but isn't this new?

Why?

This is what people went to the temple to do.

This is why religious people went to the temple at certain times and where animals were slaughtered - for that very reason.

John is replacing the killing of animals as a way to atone for sins - with a symbolic washing with water.

But of course – his community did not eat animals.

So it is not likely they would approve of killing them to appease an angry God.

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But – you never hear about this – the reason he was baptizing.
So – it leaves us to wonder why.

John - baptizing with water for the forgiveness of sins
has got to be a *pivotal moment* -
and more significant than we have realized.



And then what happens?
Jesus comes to him to be baptized.¹
And that is the second *pivotal moment* I am thinking about today.

Most modern Christians associate baptism with joining the Church community.
But at that time – it was not a rite of initiation into a community.

If baptism was an initiation into the Essene community - John's community –
there are no specific references to it.
It was for the forgiveness from sins.

We pass over this idea rather quickly this morning.
But I think it is one we will want to attend to with some study
during this next year – forgiveness – that is.
It important and affects all of us.

That is just an aside.



As the years went on many of the Jewish Christians came to understand
baptism as a way to let go of the past and the mistakes they had made
and a beginning of a fresh time in their lives.
In some communities I understand it was practiced daily.

I tell you this because this will be

in contrast with what the early Roman church will teach as a "doctrine of the atonement."

That doctrine will say that Jesus' death served as that sacrifice for us all.

That may not have been what Jesus would have wanted.

And many progressive Christians have asked the question.

Again – the question highlights the diversity among Jews at this time
and later among Christians.

And – of course it is still there.



In Luke's story

Jesus was about 30 when he went to hear John preach.

On one of these occasions – Jesus came to be baptized.

Tradition has it that it was John who baptized him -

but it is really a blending of traditions – or writers – from whom we hear the story.

I wonder what it was in John's message
that prompted Jesus to ask for baptism.

I wonder what he might have experienced at this time
that made it a *pivotal moment* – for his life.

For he immediately afterwards went into the wilderness to be alone
to contemplate his future and his calling.



I have a book called *The Uncommon Lectionary*.

The title is a play on words for the *Revised Common Lectionary* that many or most
pastors in Catholic and Protestant denominations use – and I use it too.

It just gives us an order for reading scripture.

But I also like *The Uncommon Lectionary*
because it gives me a little more about the early writings.

In the introduction the author tells us that the evidence is clear
that something profound happened within Jesus
that provided direction and energy for his ministry -

his ministry of teaching and healing.

For that was his ministry.

The author goes on to say:

"Without Jesus' baptism – there might have been no ministry –
no getting into trouble with the authorities – no crucifixion –
no resurrection experiences – no church – no Christian religion – and no church history.

This was a *pivotal moment* in Jesus' life –
a turning point about where his energy would be directed.



There is a story that seems to fit here -
that came from a group of monks known as the North African Desert Mothers and Fathers.

A monk comes to his spiritual guide with a question
about the next steps in his spiritual journey.

The monk described his solitude and daily rituals.
He asked what more he could do - in order to experience God in his life.
His spiritual guide simply responded with the words, "Become fire!"

Remember - John told us that Jesus would baptize with fire.



So – what might that mean for us?
The heart of John's message for progressive Christians is surely for us to become fire.
Know the energetic nature of God's presence in our lives.

And our journey's – yours and mine – are surely meant to embody that.
We could call it the energy of the big bang of the cosmos -
the energy of God and creation itself.

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We are children of the cosmos – stardust and cosmic energy -
and God's energy flows through our lives every moment.

We are to live and we are to live well and live better.¹



And – surely that day in the river when John baptized Jesus was an important time.

Remember what Luke tells us was said:

It was not a call of mission –
no sending him into the future with particular places to go.

What was it about?

It was about God's delight in this beloved – this chosen – one called by name.

It was not a calling to *do* – but a calling to *be*.
And sometimes we need to hear that about ourselves.



I expect there are *pivotal moments* in your life.
But do some of them get by – fly by - unnoticed?

I'm sure some have flown by scarcely noticed in my life.

And yet - I think we are supposed to notice them and we want to learn to do it better.

But it takes a little practice – noticing – talking about it with others who have a sense of it.

But for now – just try and remember and notice the *pivotal moments*
as you navigate the turns and opportunities in your life.

Keep an eye out and be aware of the touch
of something – that just might say - "You are my beloved – and I am so pleased."

¹ Adapted from Keith Akers in *The Lost Religion of Jesus*, p. 44 and following.

¹ Bruce Epperly. Process & Faith web site, 2007.