



Rev Chris Taylor - 1-13-19
God Moving

This past week the daughter of one of my wife's parishioners was in a terrible accident. She was putting gas in her van by the side of the road when a seventy-year old man plowed into her. He wasn't drunk or on drugs. He just made a mistake. But for this young woman and her family that mistake was devastating. Her legs were crushed between the two vehicles. They had to be amputated. Right now she is in an induced coma, the result of severe head injuries. On top of it all, they discovered this mother of two young children is also several weeks pregnant.

When something like that happens, whether it is to us or someone we love or even some stranger we don't know, we can't help but wonder where God was in the midst of it. If God is so loving and so involved, how come God didn't reach down and give just a flick of the wheel to take that older man over to the left and avoid hitting that poor woman? It is not just that woman and her family who are now going to suffer. That man now has to live with what happened for the rest of his life. So where was God?

This isn't just some academic question. It is a question that cuts to the very core of our Christian faith: is God there; does God care; how active or how involved is God in our lives or in the world today?

Our second lesson sheds some light.

Today we celebrate Jesus' baptism, and in our text Luke offers us a specific date, verse 1: the fifteenth year of Tiberius' reign. Depending on when you begin Tiberius' reign – whether you include the period when he served as co-regent with Augustus or start it only after Augustus was gone– then that would place Jesus' baptism between 26 and 28 CE.

In verse 23, Luke tells us that Jesus was about thirty years old when he was baptized. If we work thirty years back then from that first date, and set as a floor Herod the Great's death in 4 B.C.E. (Jesus was born during Herod the Great's reign) then we have a birth date for Jesus of somewhere between 6 and 4 B.C.E. which is precisely where most scholars place it today.

So what does all this tell us? It means that Jesus and John the Baptist lived within a specific historical framework. They aren't myth. Their stories don't stand outside of history. They were a part of history. They lived during a specific, identifiable period. They were real. All of which is to say that in Jesus and the Baptist, then, we see God breaking into this world, breaking into history, and so impacting the course of our human journey.

This, then, is not some distant, passive, inactive God. This is a God who is very much a part of our lives and of this world – a God who is intimately involved.

The second element of the text that informs our understanding is the words that were spoken at the point of Jesus' baptism. These, too, tell us much about the nature of the God we worship. They can be broken into two, distinct parts.

The first part, "You are my Son, the Beloved" is from the second psalm, verse 7. The words are not only intimate and deeply personal – my son, the one I love – but they also tell us something about Jesus himself because the second psalm is a psalm of coronation. It is a royal psalm, one that would have been used during the ceremony anointing a new King of Israel. In Hebrew, "Messiah" literally means "anointed". The King is the anointed one of God; the one who has been set apart to serve God's purposes; the Messiah.

So in these words we have the first part of Jesus' call. He is the long-awaited Messiah, the King of Israel. He is the one who is going to be God's agent of redemption.

What kind of King is he going to be? That's where the second part comes in: "With you I am well pleased." The meaning there isn't readily apparent to us, but to students of Scripture such as Jesus, the words would have immediately called to mind Isaiah 42:1; "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him [do you remember the Spirit descending like a dove on Jesus?]; he will bring forth justice to the nations."

Why is that so significant? Because Isaiah 42 is the first of four texts in that are all about what we have come to call "the suffering servant." The most famous of them, Isaiah 53, includes the familiar lines:

Surely he has borne our infirmities
And carried our diseases;
Yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
Crushed for our iniquities;
Upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
And by his bruises we are healed (Isa. 53:4,5).

So if the first part of this message tells us that Jesus is the King, the Messiah, the second part makes it clear that for him being King is not about pomp and circumstance and glory.

No, this is a king who has come to serve; a king called to suffer; a king who will offer his life to redeem all humanity.

This, then, is the God that we see in Jesus: not a God who lords it over us or delights in punishing us, but One who comes to serve – to seek our best, to join us here in the midst of our struggles and suffering... This is not some passive God who stands off to one side and simply watches. This is a God, rather, who is very much involved: a God who is active and moving in our midst whether we are aware of it or not.

So where was this God when that car careened into that young woman and her van? Some people say that terrible things are the price of free will. If God always intervened, then God would be taking away our freedom and taking away its consequences. We would never grow, never learn, never feel the need for repentance and change. Even more, if everything was perfect then there would be no chance for us to serve as God's instruments in the face of so much that is wrong and hurtful.

There is a certain logic to the argument, but it leaves unanswered the more pressing question of why God seems to break in at some moments but not at others.

Others say that there are no miracles; that what we take as a manifestation of the divine is simply coincidence or some random misfiring of the synapses of the mind. There is no god, they say, or if there is, then god is distant and uninvolved.

Such arguments have the virtue of taking God off the hook. A god who doesn't exist, or a god who is not involved can't be blamed for failing to save my loved one, or for allowing some horror like the tragedies of Yemen or Darfur to continue.

The problem with these arguments is that the god they describe is not the God we see in Jesus. It is not the God we find all through the pages of Scripture. God breaks in. God moves. God makes a difference and changes lives. So where was God when that young woman was hit?

Scripture's answer, faith's answer, is that God was right there, right beside her, standing with that woman in the moment she was hit. That's what the God we see in Jesus; the God revealed to us in the suffering servant. What Jesus suffered on the cross was every bit as wrong, every bit as evil and contrary to God's essence, as that woman being hit and crushed between two cars. Think about it: what kind of God would choose to endure the agony of the cross? What kind of God would take on the horror of losing a much-loved Son?

The answer: a God who loves us very, very much. A God who chooses to stand with us no matter what this life might send our way. A God who can be present because He has been there. A God who has plumbed the depths and so can be there with us and for us as no one else possibly can.

I don't know why God didn't intervene in that accident. Maybe he did in some way we simply haven't yet grasped. The woman's mother and two children were in that van when she was hit. Maybe the fact that they weren't seriously injured is that miracle that we are looking for.

But when I look at Jesus and the love revealed in him I make the choice to accept my limitations. I don't have all the answers. God's ways are not my ways. So much of what God does or doesn't do mystifies and confounds us at times. But because we've seen the depths of God's love we can make this choice to place our trust in him even in the face of tragedy and loss. We can live into the mystery, and so choose not to turn away when things get tough, but rather lean into this God whose very essence is love, knowing, through Christ, that we are never, ever, truly alone.

And so I would suggest that God's message to Israel in our first lesson this morning is really God's message to each of us: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior" (Isa. 43:1-3).