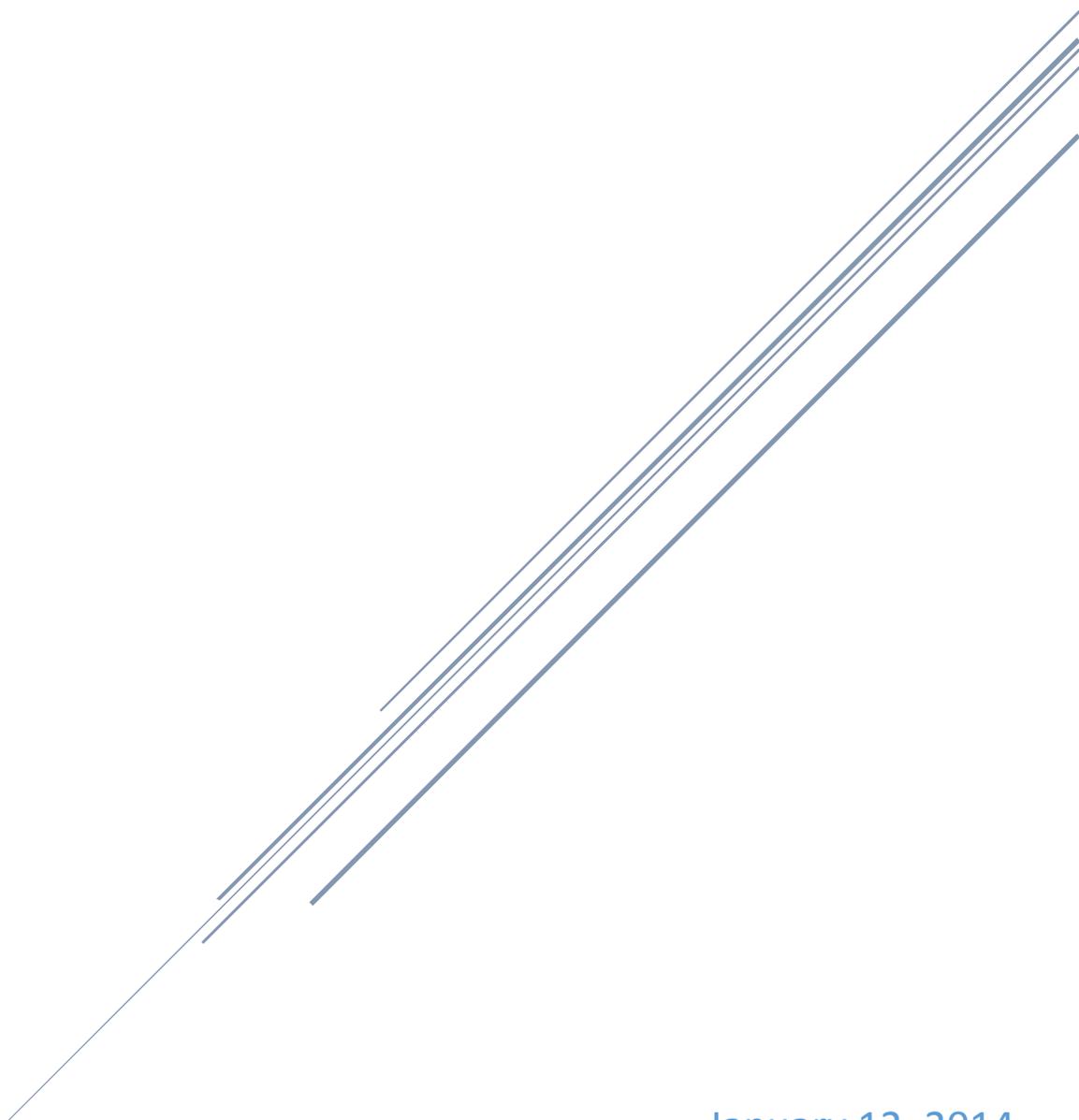


“READY FOR REVOLUTION, MY BELOVED?”

MATTHEW 2:13-17



January 12, 2014

“Ready for Revolution, My Beloved?” - *Matthew 2:13-17*

Who is the beloved? And what in the world does revolution have to do with Jesus' baptism?

When I was researching this week's message I came across a story about a black man who consciously wears his African heritage on his sleeve. But he is also a very committed Christian. As the author said, this man's Afrocentric commitment doesn't nullify his belief in Jesus; and at the same time, his Christian commitment doesn't negate his ethnic pride and awareness.

Now the point of this story is the greeting on this man's voicemail. "Hi – I can't come to the phone, etc, etc, ..." and he ends his greeting like most people do: "leave a message and I'll call you back." BUT, at the very end he closes with these words, "Ready for the Revolution!"

When you consider this man's commitment to the issues of black people, maybe this revolution refers to the overthrow of the ideologies and practices that lead to the oppression of black people (and other non-whites) all over the world.

But when we stop to think about this man's commitment to Christ, maybe this guy's revolution means something different... Maybe the revolution he's talking about is the revolution that Christian ministers have been talking about since the beginning of Christianity -- our ongoing efforts to change the world – to revolt against the self-centered and the oppressor. To turn the world as we know it upside down; to empower the powerless, to comfort the hurting, to forgive the unforgiveable. That's what Jesus taught. That's what Jesus did.

This scene from Matthew is more than just the story of Jesus getting dunked by cousin John in the Jordan River. This conversation before the baptism is only recorded in Matthew. This is the first time Jesus says anything in this gospel, and the first thing He says is "Do it now, so that we can fulfill all righteousness."

John is trying to dissuade Jesus from getting baptized, saying in essence that since Jesus is without sin, and having nothing from which to repent, that Jesus should be baptizing John, not the other way around. Which would be the expected and proper thing to do. But Jesus – again, with the very first words out of his mouth

Jesus turns the dogma and the accepted customs upside down. Why would Jesus – sinless Jesus, the Son of God, even want to be baptized by some crazy, locust-eating prophet in the desert – even if they are cousins?

Now I get a little confused when they start talking about ‘righteousness.’ We Christians tend to think of righteousness as personal piety – like Joseph and Mary or trying to be like Mother Theresa – how is God going to judge me?...Me. It’s all about me in this definition isn’t it? So I looked it up:

A more complete definition of the word for righteousness, *dikaion* is:

1. *the state of him who is as he ought to be, the condition acceptable to God*
 - a. *the doctrine concerning the way in which man may attain a state approved of God*
 - b. *integrity, virtue, purity of life, rightness, correctness of thinking feeling, and acting*
2. *in a narrower sense, justice or the virtue which gives each his due*

...and I like this explanation the best: “righteousness encapsulates God’s passionate commitment to set right the things that are wrong.” Wait – isn’t that what Jesus came for? To set right all the things that are wrong with humanity and the world? To bring us closer to God?

Jesus asking to be baptized clearly has nothing to do with personal piety and repentance. We can safely assume, I think, that Jesus is pious enough, right? But, “to fulfill all righteousness”...hmm...To fulfill God’s passionate commitment to set right the things that are wrong – OH! - that makes sense to me...

Jesus submits to baptism by John, and in so doing shows solidarity with the Baptizer’s movement – which, btw, has been growing like gangbusters -- the revolution to set right the establishment in Roman-occupied Judea. They are an oppressed people. “I take up arms with you, John, to bring God’s justice into the world.” In other words, Jesus is now ready for the revolution! Jesus has joined and will become the head of a movement that will change the world.

Jesus gets baptized and when he walks into the water he walks into the water with everyone else that day. Just like a regular person. That's us – the regular people.

And when he comes up out of the water, Jesus is one of us and we are there with him. "This is my son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased." And he's ready for the revolution.

BTW – this is one of the few times in scripture where we see all three facets of the Trinity revealed at one time in all three forms: God the parent, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Cool huh?

Jesus' baptism is also a sign of things to come. Jesus' refusal to baptize John demonstrates, as we learn later, that "the last shall be first," and "whoever wants to be greatest among you must become least."

Paul puts it best in one of my favorite passages: Philippians chapter 2:

⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was^[a] in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

⁷ but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

⁸ he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross.

Jesus comes to John and says I need to be baptized by you. And John says no, I need to be baptized by you. So Jesus says no, after you, and John says, no, after you... It's like those cartoon chipmunks, Chip 'n Dale.

All cartoons aside, Here in the Jordan river, Jesus is obedient; humbling himself and raising John up.

In our Old Testament reading today theres a phrase that caught my eye, “A bruised reed he will not break.” I get that. You might too. Because I am a bruised reed. You who are more literally mnded may be asking, “How can a reed be bruised?”

You know when you’re walking along and you see a tall stalk of grass that’s all bent over – not quite broken -- you kind of want to snap it off, right? That thing shouldn’t just be hanging there, dangling down like that....It kinda feels good to snap it off. Yoink! -- All better!

Of course nobody cares about bruised reeds and broken grass? It’s a metaphor! The bruised reed is weak or oppressed people. It’s addicted people. It’s hurt people, traumatized people, and depressed people. It’s marginalized people with disabilities or the poor or LGBT people. It’s senior citizens and undocumented immigrants. It’s anyone who is treated unfairly for whatever reason. The victims of bullying. Those bruises never go away... And here’s one we always forget: it’s people who do the bullying because hurt people hurt people....

But Isaiah says that whatever your bruise might be, this servant of God is not going to break you. Don’t despair because hope is coming.

We are all bruised reeds. I’m bruised, I’m pretty sure you’re bruised – it’s the human condition. But hope is here. It’s Jesus and it’s those who follow Jesus by emulating him the best that we know how. By being little Jesus’s. That’s the revolution. And we are the revolutionaries. “These are my children, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased.

Now, I want to remind you today, not who you are, but ‘whose’ you are – and to whom you belong. Imagine if we could live our lives without the fear of rejection. It’s a very human fear. I have it quite often and I imagine you do too. In a little bit we’re going to remember our baptisms and the voice of God which proclaims, not just to Jesus, but to all of us: “You are my beloved.” You are!

You are beloved of God. If we are to fulfill all righteousness, it's not about personal piety, you know. It's not about saying grace before every meal and going to church every Sunday and making casseroles for extended table – although those are all good, don't stop doing that -- but it's about living in the abundance of this love – this overflowing grace and acceptance; Humility like Jesus. And what would happen if we followed Jesus' example and humbled ourselves – like the little Jesus's that we are... lifting up the bruised reeds and offering them the love of Jesus Christ. That is the revolution, and you are the beloved. You are. You are...

Amen.