

“The Encounter”
Luke 3:1-22
January 13, 2019

Back in 1980 our wedding was quite an affair: over 400 guests in one of the largest Congregational churches on Long Island were greeted by a string quartet and then, an hour later, were dismissed by Widor’s Toccata on the pipe organ. But it was something unconventional which happened as a direct result of that wedding that will always stick with me.

The wedding party numbered five bridesmaids and five groomsmen. Tradition has it that one of the purposes of such a wedding party is to pair off, romantically, some of the unmarried members. Little did we know that two members of that wedding party would set off fireworks: after the ceremony, Roe unceremoniously flung Marjorie over his shoulder, dumped her in the front seat of his pick-up truck, and together they disappeared in a cloud of dust for Cuttyhunk Island, where Roe was (among other things), a sheep herder.

Unfortunately, their torrid affair barely made it to the end of the year - our wedding having been in August. The entire relationship blew up spectacularly. Marjorie is now married to a rather sedate Lutheran clergyman, while Roe, after all these decades, is still single ... as well as a rather successful architect featured on NPR.

But allow me to backup a moment: just before leaving us all in a cloud of dust, Roe and Marjorie left Susan and me a note, thanking us for bringing them together. And the note was addressed, rather cleverly we thought, to Susan . Peter . Wyburn.

Amazingly, the “Wyburn” conflation of our two last names has informally stuck through the years. It even appears on our house-sign out in the front yard at 21 West River Road. And, it has come to symbolize some of what works in our relationship. We are no longer Blackburn and Wyman. We are often known as the Wyburns. And in those instances - which occur in any marriage - where things are in danger of coming apart at the seams, we’ve noticed that’s when Susan becomes more of a Wyman again,

while I revert to being a Blackburn. We, as a couple, only really work when these two opposites of Wyman and Blackburn come together to create something which is both, and yet neither - Blackburns and Wymans being very, very different creatures.

Today's scripture lesson illustrates that well: on the one hand, you have an Old Testament style prophet, John the Baptist, who calls the people of Israel to repentance. And who should come to him but a carpenter's son from Galilee, the one person who, in all the world, does not need to repent. Jesus and John were two very different men, two opposites. The one baptizes with water, the other will baptize with fire. One wanders through the wastelands, eating little, drinking nothing ... while the other will walk the highways and byways, seeking those who are lost, eating with sinners, drinking with his friends. John goes about things the old way, while Jesus will begin something very, very new. But it took the two of them coming together, at the River Jordan, to bring it all about.

So John cried out in the wilderness, and people came. Some were simply curious, some were genuinely interested. The authorities were there to keep an eye on things, to make sure nothing got out of hand. Some came to repent for a while, be washed, then wander back into a way of life that made repentance necessary in the first place. Others would listen, but would not act, would not submit to the waters of Jordan. But still John cried out to all who would listen. For he was Elijah come again.

And so Jesus came too. He had heard the voice of God, having listened to it as he sat at home while the old, old story of ancient Israel and its God was told. Jesus had seen God act in the neighborly deeds among his townspeople. He had sensed God's presence when he worshipped in the synagogue in Nazareth, and had been filled with some transcendent power when he had withdrawn from family and friends to pray. And now, Jesus once again heard God, sensed God, saw the acts of God in this man whom people called The Baptist. And through John, Jesus knew that God was speaking to him.

John perceived God too, but differently than Jesus did. John had sensed where God was not heard, where God was not present. When the Pharisees came, John knew they were corrupt. The tax collectors came, and John knew them to be extorting funds from the poor. The soldiers came, and John saw them as the instruments of oppression of a foreign power that fed itself fat on the theory that might gives right. And in all this crowd at the banks of the River Jordan, where John could discern no presence of the divine, came someone entirely different: someone who didn't fit the pattern. For in Jesus there was a greatness that could not be contained, even in death. And that greatness was here. He was here. And John became conscious of God's presence, heard God's voice, and saw God's face, when Jesus came to be baptized.

And so Jesus submitted himself to the waters of the Jordan - not so much to repent, but to signal a new beginning, just as we in our own baptism have been given the chance to start anew. At the River Jordan, Jesus was to begin a ministry, a ministry which those of us who are baptized have come to share. At the River Jordan, Jesus began a movement which we continue, proclaiming a coming Kingdom for which we still work. Jesus was to make all things new, to bring life to the entire world, to be God-with-us.

But to achieve all this, Jesus first had to come to John. To make something new, Jesus had to start with the old. To begin his life's work, Jesus came to someone who had begun long before he. And in that coming together, in the encounter of opposites, something greater was created, and the accomplishment of God's will was blessed by the Spirit when the words were uttered: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Of course, not everyone has heard those words. Not everyone acknowledges that there even is a God, or that Jesus was something special, or that John was important. It's like the historian who studies an obscure group of Hebrew tribes, mostly nomads, who settle down, are eventually conquered by a series of outsiders, and become scattered over the face of the earth. They produce some literature, some music and art, and a few

outstanding figures, but little else. But millions of people have seen that same story and have sensed in it evidence that God is at work in human life.

Likewise, some people come in and have a seat Sunday mornings, hear some singing, listen to some words of inspiration, perhaps doze off a bit, then have a cup of coffee with a few folks before going back home. They must enjoy it somehow, or else they wouldn't be here in the first place. But where some have merely seen and heard, others have been filled with the Spirit, have sensed the rustle of angels' wings, and have sat in the Presence of the Divine.

So it is with baptism. Scholars can tell you how the custom began, the fact that some pagan religions used the blood of a bull instead of water, that initiations into some secret societies involved baptismal acts, and that it is often connected with religious revivals. What some of the scholars don't see, but what the believer does see, is that there is more to it than that ... just as there is more to worship than singing hymns and following a set of rituals. There is more to history than the story of our inhumanity to each other. There is more to each one of us than just skin and bones and appetite.

Likewise, there is more to Jesus than mere inspiration and some fine ethical teachings. There is more to Christ than stories of kindness, piety, or reform. His was more than a ministry of miracles. For there is more to baptism than just water, and the Lord's Supper isn't just some bread and a cup. Indeed, the Bible is more than a story book, just as the church is not only a building. So too is prayer not just thinking good thoughts or meditating.

And so Jesus came to John to be washed, and God's voice was heard. But God speaks to us not only in our minds, but through the sound of the church bell, the melodies of an organ played by human hands, and the voices of the faithful lifted up in praise, joy, and thanksgiving. Listen! For God speaks not just because he's entertained by the sound of his own voice, but because this is God's world. He made it. He pronounced it good.

He continues to be involved with it. And nothing would please God more than to be reunited with it. All of it.

That is why Jesus came; have you encountered him? That is why Jesus is still here; has he made of your life something new? That is why we gather; have our lives as a congregation and a community been transformed? And that is why we give ourselves to God's service: so that all things might be made new.

Let us pray: