

Sunday, January 8, 2012
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – "God is Calling"

Happy New Year!

That singular expression is so full of potential and promise.

A New Year – a blank slate.

Starting fresh.

Today's lessons bring us this sense of new beginnings.

Our Old Testament reading, taken from page 1 of the Bible, takes us to the very beginning of all creation when God stilled the chaos and created light.

Our New Testament reading takes us to the very beginning of Jesus' ministry.

This is a dramatic, radical beginning.

Jesus' baptism is not a gentle sprinkling of water on the head of a baby.

Jesus' baptism is a plunge into cold water – a full immersion into the Jordan River.

You know that feeling when you dive into a cool lake or the ocean and your whole body reacts.

When you come up for air, you feel refreshed – you feel new.

When Jesus was coming up out of the water, "he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him."

Again, this is not a simple sunbeam illuminating his presence.

The heavens are torn apart – the Spirit descends on him.

We are not certain whether the other people present experienced the heavens and the voice but we are witness to Jesus publically receiving God's call.

We hear the words,

"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

This moment of baptism for Jesus is an important turning point in his life.

It marks the start of his public ministry, but also tells us a lot more about Jesus than we may realize at first.

John's baptism was about confession of sin and receiving forgiveness.

Marcus Borg tells us that repentance means more than confession and forgiveness. He says the meaning of the word, as it is used in scripture means “to go beyond the mind that you have – to go beyond conventional understanding of what life with God is about.”

Certainly that is the lesson that Jesus brought us – to go beyond the conventional understanding of what life with God is about.

Since Jesus was without sin, he had no need of John's baptism.

Jesus, however, chose to be baptized because his mission was not a "lone ranger" work of swooping in and "doing salvation" for us.

Rather, Jesus came to build a new community, a new way of being together for all of humanity - for all of creation.

Jesus chose to stand with us in our brokenness and sinfulness.

He did not keep himself separate from us because we failed to meet his standards of holiness.

Rather, he jumped into the mess of our lives, immersing himself in our suffering and our sin.

He began by becoming part of the human community, and then he began to create a new community by inviting us into a different way of thinking, of speaking, of acting and of being.

We are invited to transform ourselves via Jesus' experience.

We are encouraged to open ourselves up to feel the Holy Spirit descending onto and into us.

One writer described these experiences as “*Epiphanies*;

moments of clarity or ecstasy when the enormity of the wonder of the physical world, harmony with others, and relationship with the transcendent, with God, are felt in powerful, transformational ways.”

This means that Jesus' baptism was not just an event that happened to Jesus a long time ago.

Jesus' baptism is an invitation that continues to beckon us today – to belong to a God-created, God-called community.

When we choose to accept the invitation, we discover that we, like Jesus, become those who are called to stand alongside the broken and hurting, the sinful and wayward people of our world.

We are called to invite them, the other, the marginalized to become part of God's new community.

We extend our welcome through our acts and words of grace, love, justice and challenge,

Jesus went to the Jordan answering God's call in his life.

This day, we too, turn our attention to God's call for us.

As this New Year begins, we must ask ourselves, "What is God's call for us?"

Over the next few weeks I want to explore with you what it is that we believe and what God might be calling us to do in this moment in time.

I want to start by asking you a question that came to me twice in the past month.

"What do you believe?"

I am always intrigued by this question because it requires that I have the ability to articulate my beliefs.

I'm sure that many of you are familiar with the NPR program called,

This I Believe.

This I Believe is based on a 1950s radio program of the same name, hosted by acclaimed journalist Edward R. Murrow.

Each day, Americans gathered by their radios to hear compelling essays from the likes of Eleanor Roosevelt, Jackie Robinson, Helen Keller, and Harry Truman as well as corporate leaders, cab drivers, scientists, and secretaries—anyone able to distill into a few minutes the guiding principles by which they lived.

In reviving *This I Believe* as a radio program from 2005-2009, NPR executive producer Dan Gediman said, "The goal is not to persuade Americans to agree on the same beliefs. Rather, the hope is to encourage people to begin the much more difficult task of developing respect for beliefs different from their own."

A not-for-profit organization, This I Believe, Inc., was founded in 2004 to engage youth and adults from all walks of life in writing, sharing, and discussing brief essays about the core values that guide their daily lives.

On their website there are 4,851 essays under the theme faith and religion. The titles include "Created in God's Image," "The Holy Grail of Peaceful Coexistence," "The Faith that Brings me Peace," even, "There is No God."

I invite you to spend some time in the next few weeks reflecting on what it is that you believe and how your beliefs motivate and inform your life.

There is no goal of consensus – there is no right or wrong belief. There is simply a yearning for clarity.

I want you to be able to answer the question, "What Do You Believe?"

Visit the ancient creeds of the Christian church –the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed.

Take a look at the 1913 Kansas City Statement of Faith or the more recent, United Church of Christ Affirmation of Faith.

All of these are in our hymnals starting on page 511.

Reflect on the words that you sing in worship, the Gloria Patri or the Doxology – so reflexive that you might not even know the words if you had to say them slowly.

This year, the Deacons and I are going to pay particular attention to our worship service.

I want to hear from you about your worship experiences.

I want you to ask questions.

I want you to share your moments of *epiphanies*.

If you feel the Holy Spirit at work in your life – tell me about it – tell someone else about it.

When you come to worship, I want you to plunge yourself into the Jordan River and come up gasping for air.

I want you to feel baptized and beloved.

I want you to hear God calling you and for you to respond with vigor.

We are the church of Jesus Christ.

We gather to affirm our love of God and love of neighbor.

We gather to empower one another to be the Body of Christ in the world.

The United Church of Christ's Statement of Faith articulates what I believe:

United Church of Christ Statement of Faith—adapted by Robert V. Moss

(I) We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, who is made known to us in Jesus our brother, and to whose deeds we testify:

God calls the worlds into being, creates humankind in the divine image, and sets before us the ways of life and death.

God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.

God judges all humanity and all nations by that will of righteousness declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, God has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the whole creation to its Creator.

God bestows upon us the Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.

God calls us into the church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be servants in the service of the whole human family, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.

God promises to all who trust in the gospel forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, the presence of the Holy Spirit in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in that kingdom which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto God.

Amen.