



Heaven and Earth Come Together

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given on June 6, 2021

The Nativity of St. John the Baptizer; Luke 1:57-80

In the name of the Triune God, who sets us free. Amen.

I'd like to begin today with a question for you. And by "you" I mean both all of you here in this room and all of you joining us via livestream or the recording later. In fact who is operating the camera? Can you spin it to the congregation and have everyone wave? We see you! We are glad you are with us! OK, now for the question. Look back over your life. Can you remember a time when even just for a moment, things were as they should be? Where something happened that really, at last, was truly right? There are some days in the life of the world when the line between heaven and earth blurs, the two become one, and we see beautiful things—evidence of God's kingdom, God's realm coming on earth as it is in heaven. We see something happen that is truly right and good, truly liberating and healing. Something thunderously joyful.

Yesterday, I was at the ordination to the priesthood of Kate Maxwell, longtime member of St. John's. She is approximately seventy years old. All her life she has experienced call to ordination, but at first she was in the Catholic church where women could not be ordained; then she needed to do some personal healing that took attention and

priority; then she simply felt too old. But your previous Rector Susan Barnes, when she heard this, said, “Too old for *what?*” And Kate began the long process of discerning her call. Yesterday things came full circle and we gathered at St. Mark’s Cathedral where the Bishop joyfully ordained Kate and another woman. Even though it was long overdue, God’s blessing and the Church’s actions and Kate’s personal response to God all came together, the Spirit moved, and there was a thunderous celebration. Heaven and earth came together.

Yesterday was also Juneteenth, the day we remember June 19th, 1865, when Major General Gordon Granger and his troops arrived in Galveston, Texas, to deliver General Order No. 3 to everyone there. This order said:

The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves.¹

Even though the Emancipation Proclamation had happened about two and a half years earlier, some estimate that more than 250,000 African Americans were still enslaved in Texas.² It had been 246 years since the first slave ship arrived in North America. It was long

¹ See “Juneteenth and General Order No. 3,” in *Galveston History* (www.galvestonhistory.org), accessed June 20, 2021 at <https://www.galvestonhistory.org/news/juneteenth-and-general-order-no-3>.

² See Gillian Brockell, Kate Rabinowitz and Frank Hulley-Jones, “Juneteenth,” in *The Washington Post* (June 17, 2021), accessed June 20, 2021 at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/interactive/2021/juneteenth-history-texas-emancipation-photos/>.

overdue, but heaven and earth merged, the will of God for liberation and justice and wholeness was proclaimed, and there were even troops there to enforce the law. And even though things were not immediately made right, far from it, freedom was realized in the flesh in real peoples' lives that day and has been celebrated ever since. Heaven and earth came together.

Today we celebrate the Nativity of St. John the Baptist, whom our church is named after. I'm very delighted to say that we will also celebrate a new member at St. John's, Alex Musial, and also the baptism of a beautiful baby, Simon Jones. Today is a perfect day for baptism as we honor St. John the Baptizer. St. John declared a radical amnesty, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John himself was born to Zechariah and Elizabeth, an elderly couple who had had no success having children when they were of childbearing age, and who like Kate Maxwell thought they were far too old for their dreams to be realized. And in the reading from today, the moment has arrived, and John is born to this beautiful older couple, and it's time for the baby to be named. It appears it would have been custom to name the baby after a relative, as the reading from today's gospel says. The name of the baby's father, Zechariah, means "God remembers." But this is not the name the Angel had instructed them to give the baby. The baby was to be called John, which means, "God has been gracious."

And then John spends his life teaching and baptizing and calling the people to repent, to prepare them for the coming of Jesus, through whom he says a radical amnesty is available. When John's father Zechariah can finally speak again, he speaks a prophecy which has come to be known as the Song of Zechariah, the Benedictus, which is so powerful it is part of our daily Morning Prayer in the Book of Common Prayer—Canticle 16 on page 92 for the church nerds among us.³ Zechariah says that God has come to his people to set them free from the hands of their enemies. That people who had sat in darkness have seen a great light. That their feet would be guided into the way of peace. In his son John and in the coming Jesus, heaven and earth were coming together.

Because to say that God remembers, as Zechariah's name means, seemed not to be enough. God remembered everything—all the goodness of the world as we were created, and all that the people had suffered, and all the suffering the people had inflicted on others. Just remembering does not bring wholeness. The people needed the gift of what John's name means—"God gives grace." They needed the gift of what Jesus' names means—"God delivers." For heaven and earth to come together, we need a power greater than ourselves. To be freed from the sin of systemic racism, we do need repentance, but then we need the power and the grace of God to enact liberation. To be who we were created to be, we need the power of the Holy Spirit, which is what baptism is all about.

³ <https://www.bcponline.org>.

In today's gospel reading, Zechariah says that to the people who have been sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death, dawn will break, light will shine. This must be what those slaves felt, those slaves who on June 19th heard the thing they most bitterly yearned for, that they never expected to happen, which is that they were free at last. You see, the order of things where there is abuse, and violence, and greed, and passivity and apathy about the suffering of others, is not the natural order. That is the dark; it is the shadow of death. But we were not made to dwell forever in the dark, or to perpetuate the dark. Did you know that our scriptures describe over and over again a God who seeks in every way possible to reach out to us, to deliver us from all that keeps us stuck and captive, so that we can claim our birthright? Did you know that you were meant to embody divine light every single moment of every day of your life? Did you know that all those areas in which we have been stuck—as individuals and as a church and a nation—are not ultimate? God has come to God's people and set them free. The power of the risen Christ makes itself known in countless ways, as many ways as there are shades of green in the trees, as many ways as there are stars in the heavens. We do not have to continue to live in the bondage of despair, or alcoholism, or abusive relationships, or systemic racism, or failure to recognize the stunning beautiful diversity of the LGBTQ community, or any other hurt or guilt that is so heavy we can never dig ourselves out from under it. We are meant to experience and enact the great jubilee of liberation, and to embody the divine light of Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit every single day of every moment of our lives. Heaven and earth are meant to come together.

In honor of St. John the Baptizer, then, let's allow our spirits to grow strong by turning to God for help. Let's admit when we need a power greater than ourselves to liberate us from the areas we as individuals and as a collective are stuck. Let's dare to believe that the light from on high is dawning on us, and pray for eyes to see it. Let's allow God to make us agents of the healing, liberating and loving Way of Jesus. Because there are days in the life of the world when heaven and earth come together. This is such a day. Amen.