

It Takes God to See the New
First UMC of Pocatello
January 8, 2023

John 1:29-34

I myself did not know him.

It is strange to hear this claim of ignorance come not once but twice from the lips of John the Baptist. Strange because it runs against the grain of what we think we know about this story.

Weren't they cousins, John and Jesus? Sons of mothers, Elizabeth and Mary, who were close kin and had shared together in miraculous pregnancies? Even if, as a young man, John had taken to an eccentric life in the wilderness, and Jesus to an obscure life in Nazareth, *surely*, they must've been raised hearing their families repeat the prophetic words that had early on intertwined their destinies.

Well... *perhaps*. We actually get *all* of that biographical information from *Luke's* Gospel. But the writer of John's Gospel chooses to omit it, and leaves us to ponder a Baptizer who states repeatedly and emphatically, *I myself did not know him*.

Maybe John framed his story in this way to defend against the appearance or accusation of nepotism: that these cousins had secretly plotted out some high drama to invest Jesus with the appearance of divine authority: "I'll be forerunner, and you'll be Messiah, and we'll both get ours in the end." There are, after all, polemical strategies at work in the Gospels to address outsiders' criticisms and questions of the early Christians.

Or, maybe the idea here is that the Baptizer, while knowing Jesus well enough, even as family, had no way of perceiving until the moment of baptism that his Galilean cousin was the Lamb of God, the Chosen One, the one on whom the Spirit would descend. I bet you've been surprised by the sudden evolution or transformation or opening-up of a person you thought you knew well, when all of sudden you realized how much any person, even *this* person, might surprise you. It doesn't take much for me to imagine not knowing the inner realities of faraway cousins all that deeply.

Or, most strangely, maybe the Baptizer in John's Gospel is stating the plain truth: he did not know this person. He knew the signs to look for, because the Spirit had spoken to his heart, but that was all. If you isolate it from the prevailing *tradition* about John and Jesus' kinship, this Gospel doesn't give us any information to suggest it.

No matter how we choose to take it, the doubly stated *I myself did not know him* seems to ground this passage in the Baptizer's exhilarating experience of coming to know Jesus as the Christ, the one he had been looking and preparing for so much time. In the Jordan river, when the Spirit descended from heaven on this man, it was true *epiphany* – the sudden appearance of a new reality. It thrilled and delighted the Baptizer.

He couldn't help but speak about it! "Look!" he says, "that's the one!" This is the only Gospel where the story of Jesus' baptism comes, we might say, *third hand* – by way of a separate character's *testimony*. It doesn't stand alone as an event, but is instead disclosed through dialogue, through the memory and testimony of the Baptizer: "I myself did not know him, *but I have seen and have testified.*" The surprise. The thrill of the new. It's palpable. Just listen to the Baptist!

The Gospel obviously asks us to *believe* the Baptizer's testimony; but deeper than that, it wants to pluck at the strings of our desire and sets our core thrumming: **The thrill of being met and startled alive by the**

God who comes toward us, who meets us in the new; we can know that, too.

Take a moment and bring to mind a memory from your own life of a time that you experienced something genuinely new; maybe it was profound and engrossing; maybe it was something seemingly small that punctuated – or, better, punctured – your day, and let a little light in and you’ve never forgotten it.

Experiences with the unknown unleash a rich range of emotional responses: shock, wonder, joy, reverence, romance, amusement, curiosity, passion, laughter, gratitude. These feelings are essential to our being human because, when they’re strong enough, they birth momentous personal changes: conversions of worldviews and morals, new commitments to people or places, vocations or habits. Even when something unknown *scares* us or, in some cases, *disgusts* us at first, with some patience and prolonged exposure even those feelings can be transfigured into revelations of a new kind of beauty – and lead us into profound aesthetic or ethical transformations.

Without the possibility of learning new things, of growing in understanding, of being surprised, our lives would be boring, drab, static, even tyrannical. But to be like *John* – looking, waiting, attentive to signs, ready for the new reality of Christ to come toward us at any moment – that is what we are created for. Encountering the genuinely new, being fully present to it and open to what it might teach us – that is one of the greatest joys and risks of life. John’s expectant posture toward the new is why he was able to see it clearly and to testify to it with authority. What I’m saying is that our not-knowing is the very condition for encountering God.

Honoring our not-knowing as the fertile ground for revelation that it is is a more difficult than we may initially suspect. When we’re young we complain about our elders for being set in their ways. Hearing that

“this is how it must be because this is how it’s always been” gets our hackles up. We think of ourselves as open-minded – but, truth is, in 2023, most everyone’s mind has been subsumed in the great stream of information technology. Everyone with a television or tablet or smart phone runs up against unprecedented amounts of opposition to encountering the thrill and risk of not-knowing.

I have a friend who reads the summaries and critical reviews of every new movie he wants to see *before* he goes to see it in the theater. He wants to know what to expect and *what* the discussion is around it – even before he experiences it. Through social media we interact with others’ virtual avatars and create them for ourselves. We see the world through the lenses of marketing images, and follow the algorithms to individually tailored, but secretly purchased, visions of life. We scroll, rather than walk, listen, and look to get our news. We don’t get lost because we are told where to make every turn. We watch a documentary about jazz without ever slipping inside a club.

The internet, the algorithmic digital stream to which we yield so much of our attention and experience keeps us from standing fully present and impressionable before the naked reality of new things. We think we know so much because – here it is! But because disembodied information can rarely rouse our innermost self, because it comes to us coded but not sensed, the awe and the joy we are created to experience are blunted, and the explosive transformations of which we are capable are diffused. If we are to regain a capacity to be awestruck by the new, we must grapple with this unprecedented, contemporary challenge.

Which brings us to baptism. The meaning of baptism is kaleidoscopic. But one of the pictures that falls into place when we peer into its mystery is that it is a sign for us that God intends to make us new by submerging us in what is new. It is an earthy act, and it asks us to get in touch with the world around us; to let our skin be wet with its waters.

That immediacy of experience, that willingness to be touched by the world around us primes us for a fresh anointing of the Spirit. But baptism cannot mean this to us if we are convinced that we know it all at the start, that we have nothing more to learn, that we cannot be surprised, or that the new no longer exists.

I believe that the Spirit wants to galvanize our congregation this year. I can feel it in my bones. Maybe not for explosive membership growth, maybe not for a dramatic uptick in tithing – but certainly for deepened, joyful faith; for the radical, tender embrace of others; for humble walking with God. The Spirit wants to unveil the glories inherent in our baptismal call.

But, for that, we must hold space for *what we do not yet know*. We must allow for the possibility of the unknown and the unknowable. We must have teachable spirits, and as the Methodist motto puts it, *Open hearts, open minds, open doors*. If we can do that, if we can watch for the signs of Christ's appearance among us without distraction or presumption, we will know joy.

A church that thinks it knows it all is a dead church. But a church that is always circling back to the beginning, always schooling itself in the "I myself did not know him", *that* church is primed and ready for the moment of epiphany: "...but I have seen and I have testified."

In case we need assurance that a testimony like that is worth listening to, we only have read on a couple verses to see that Jesus' first disciples follow him because of John's stunned pointing. They wanted to know what the Baptist knew, and they were humble enough to admit that they didn't know him yet, but they sure would like to; they had enough wonder and courage to go and see.

I titled this sermon "It Takes God to See the New," but I realize that the real thrust of it is this, "It Takes the New to See God." Not-knowing is unsettling. It feels risky. It lacks the sureness of control and

the ease of complacency. But the congregation that can settle itself in the unsettling is a miracle to the world around it.

O God, may we be like Abraham who heard the whisper in his heart,

like Jacob who wrestled the sudden stranger in the night,

like Moses, who lingered long enough to see the burning bush,

like Mary, stunned by the declaration of the angel,

like Joseph, met and changed through his dreams,

like the shepherds, awake while the world around them slept,

like John the Baptist, waiting, watching, and working,
clearing a path in his heart for the Christ to come toward him.

Amen.