Open the Curtain

One of the many gifts in my work as a hospice chaplain is the opportunity to learn from other people’s faith traditions. I meet people who are Baha’i and Buddhist, Muslim and Jewish, those with no religious tradition and those who are devout followers. Recently a new chaplain has joined our staff, and it has been a great honor to work with and learn from an Orthodox Rabbi named Yitzack.

Earlier this week he shared a parable with our hospice team. Parables are not only stories Jesus used and we read from the Bible, but they’re also modern day stories use to teach lessons about life and about God.

One rabbi goes to the home of another rabbi and he notices that the curtains in his home are drawn closed. The visiting one says, “There is something I do not understand. If you wish people to be able to look in, why do you draw the curtains? And if you do not wish for people to be able to look in, what purpose is there for windows?”

The rabbi was stunned by the question. But the one who asked the question smiled and answered it himself, “I'll tell you what the window is for. There may be someone whom you trust and who you know loves you, and you can then open the curtains and let him look in.”

My colleague, Yitzack, said to us, “there are people—patients and families—who trust us enough to open the curtain just a little bit and let us see into their lives—their loves and losses, joys and fears. This is a gift to be let in to the most vulnerable and tender times in their lives and we give thanks that the curtains are opened and we are allowed to see in.”

Now I know that this parable has nothing to do with baptism. Nothing. But I have been thinking a lot about baptism all week—the baptisms of my twins on this feast day 10 years ago, Mave and Nicholas who were plunged into the baptismal waters today, those adults who stand before us today as part of their own preparation to affirm their baptism—and of course this sermon. And when I heard this parable about opening the curtain, so that those we love and trust can see into our lives, I immediately thought of the curtain of heaven being opened up at Jesus baptism.

It’s a part of the story we don’t always pay much attention to, but hear it again: “Now when all were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized..., the heaven was opened. And the spirit descended on him.”

God opens the curtain! God opens up the heavens and we catch a glimpse of this love and power. And it’s one of the few times in scripture that God speaks directly “You are my son the beloved, with you I am well pleased.” Everything starts at the river where Jesus enters the waters, is baptized and hears the promise from God breaking through the open heavens. In that moment, Jesus is claimed and called—called to do the impossible: save humanity.

God calls us, too, and opens the curtain of heaven to see us more fully—in all our vulnerability and brokenness—part of this very humanity Jesus came to save. God removes all that separates us and meets us where we are and as we are—in order that we too might know that we are beloved children of God and God is well pleased with us too. God opens the curtain wide and says, “I see you! I love you! You are mine.”
In our Lutheran tradition, the baptismal liturgy gives us an opportunity to welcome the baptized and remember that they join us in mission. That mission includes opening the curtain. We join Christ in this mission of opening; maybe not a curtain, but there is much more to open. As faithful followers we open this table to the stranger, we open closet doors and welcome all who bring their secrets into this holy place. Through organizations like Lutheran Immigration and refugee services and Refugee One, we work to open borders rather than build walls. Week after week, we open our wallets and give to the work of this faith community and beyond—the work being done all over this world in Christ’s name. The list of the ways our ministry is about opening literal and figurative doors and windows is endless. And we’re empowered to do this because God has already opened the curtain between heaven and earth and moved across these baptismal waters and provided bread and wine for this feast. And God has opened and continues to open our hearts to see the needs of our neighbor, the suffering of the stranger, the cries of the earth.

This is both Baptism of our Lord Sunday, and the 1st Sunday after the Epiphany. In Greek, “epiphaneia” means appearing or revealing. In this brief season between Advent and Lent, we’ve packed up Christmas in our homes and left the swaddling clothes behind to turn to stories of shimmering revelation—kings and stars, doves and voices, water, wine and transfiguration. Author Debi Thomas says the stories of Epiphany are in the “thin places” where the boundary between the mundane and the eternal becomes permeable. Where God parts the curtain and we catch glimpses of God’s love, majesty and power. Thomas calls us to “practice epiphany: look again, look harder, see freshly. Stand in the place that might possibly be thin, and regardless of how jaded you feel, cling to the possibility of surprise. Epiphany,” she says, “is deep water—you can’t dip your toes in. You must take a breath and plunge.”

Even in the deepest water, we are God’s beloved. God’s own. God’s children. God’s pleasure.