

*The Path from Zero to One*

*Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder*

*United Church of Strafford, Vermont*

*January 9, 2022 First Sunday after Epiphany, Baptism of Christ*

*Isaiah 43:1-2; Philippians 2:1-9a, 12d-15; Mark 1:4-5, 9-13*

**Welcome:** Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this First Sunday after Epiphany and Baptism of Christ Sunday. Epiphany comes from a Greek word that means to reveal. During the Season of Epiphany we celebrate revelations of God's manifestation in all creation. Epiphany is about seeing the light of God—it begins with the star shining over Bethlehem and ends with Jesus shining on the mountain of transfiguration. Epiphany reminds us of people who have shown us the light of Christ through their lives, and taught us that it is in all people everywhere. Jesus calls us to follow a spiritual path to see and shine an increasing share of that light. We make the presence of God manifest by using our gifts to help create the realm of God on earth, being a force for positive social change, and extending loving care and support to those around us. We may be on Zoom today, but we can still shine the light of our love.

**Call to Worship:** Today we will hear God say to Jesus that he is beloved. We will hear how God sent the Holy Spirit upon Jesus as an expression of that love. The Spirit then guided and empowered him along a path of personal transformation so that he could help transform the world. God wants to do the same for us. This Sunday in Epiphany asks us to open our hearts to hear and feel and believe in God's love for us just as we are, and it asks us to open to the Spirit and its path of transformation so that we will transform the world around us. The church is the body of Christ and we each are members of it. God needs us to be Christ in this time and place, baptized anew, so let us open wide to the Spirit as we worship together....

**Children's Time:** We have no young children with us on this Zoom today, so the Children's Time is for us all...

Imagine Jesus as a young carpenter hearing about his cousin John who was baptizing people in the River Jordan calling people to undergo metanoia, an expansion of their hearts and minds to be more like God, because the realm of God was at hand, ready to be established on earth.

Imagine Jesus feeling so moved by this message that he left work and walked sixty miles to undergo that change of consciousness and join the movement to change the world. His baptism

was a sign of his commitment, a ritual death of his old self and a rebirth as he came dripping up the river bank. It led to a whole new way of seeing and being one with God and all creation that led to his heart filling to overflowing with love and compassion for everyone, creating a community of love around him.

We see the same pattern in people's lives throughout history. Archbishop Desmond Tutu suffered under the hate-filled terrorism of a white supremacist, Christian nationalist government. And yet Tutu, Nelson Mandela and countless other South Africans underwent a kind of baptism of suffering that left them humbled and emptied, like Jesus in the River Jordan, and they rose from those waters filled with new vision of all people as one with a Christ-like love that enabled formerly hate-filled enemies to live together in the new South Africa.

A black woman came before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that Bishop Tutu chaired to face the white policeman who tortured and killed her husband and only child, her grown son. The policeman told her the terrible story of what he had done, and she told him the unbearable pain his actions had caused her.

Then the commission asked her what she would like to see happen. She looked across at the policeman and told him that she had no one left in her family, thanks to him, and what she wanted was for him to become as a son to her so she could love and care for him...

Miracles happen when we are like Jesus or Bishop Tutu or that woman. The Holy Spirit can fill us and help us see oneness and love unconditionally, and create something like the realm of God on earth. It's what the Lord's Prayer means by thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. That prayer is a step on the path to its fulfillment, so let us pray it now...

**Sermon: *The Path from Zero to One***

Epiphany is a season of light, and also a season of paths. It begins with a path across the desert revealed by a star, and it ends with a path up the mountain of transfiguration to see Jesus revealed as a being of light.

Today we celebrate the major turn in Jesus' life-path that came at his baptism. Three years ago on Baptism of Christ Sunday I first preached about the spiritual path that I have spoken of repeatedly in the past two months, the path of kenosis, metanoia, agape and koinonia, or in English, the path of self-emptying, transformation of consciousness, unconditional love and the beloved community of God's realm on earth.

This path works on multiple timelines at once. Human history is a path we hope is leading through evolving human consciousness and expanding visions of oneness toward a sustainable way of living on earth that helps the community of all God's creation thrive.

Each individual human life is on its own similar path through baptisms where we let go of who we have been and what we have thought and undergo the metanoia of having an expanded heart and mind. Ideally, we become more pluralistic as we mature until we experience the true oneness of all life and shine with love that builds community around us.

The path works on a third level as well. Every day brings us opportunities to empty our self of self-concern, to shift from the ego's perspective to the Holy Spirit's. We have routine opportunities for lovingkindness that overcome differences or divisions, like a kind word said in line at Coburns or on the phone with customer service, and in such moments we create a tiny spark of God's realm on earth.

All three of these paths from kenosis to koinonia end in peace and joy and love, but they begin in painful struggle.

The contemporary theologian Karen Armstrong explains in her book *The Case for God*, "The truths of religion are accessible only when you are prepared to get rid of the selfishness, greed, and self-preoccupation that...are ingrained in our thoughts and behavior but are also the source of so much of our pain. The Greeks would call this process kenosis, self-emptying." The Rev. Jim Antal commented on that quote in his book *Climate Church, Climate World* saying, "Faithfulness calls us to reduce our investment, not only in selfish behaviors but in self-centered fear as well."

That's a tall order. Even if we can do that painful self-emptying of our ego, we can feel legitimate fear that the path will lead us into conflict with the powers of selfishness and greed. We do not know how the Holy Spirit will use us, what it will ask us to do and what will come of it but we do know that Jesus suffered and was crucified before he was resurrected and glorified.

Yet we have come to the banks of the River Jordan again where John the Baptist is urgently calling us to allow ourselves to be changed for the sake of the realm of God. The Spirit that created and evolved the earth whispers within our hearts that this is the path it needs us to take. The Spirit wants life to survive and thrive. It created us each with our different gifts and

callings to serve that great cause, and now it asks that we enter these waters and give our entire will and life over to its guidance as Jesus did.

The Baptism of Christ is a symbol of the path the Spirit asks to choose: the death of our old self followed by resurrection as someone new; lowly self-emptying followed by filling with the Spirit's higher power.

Jesus was not the only spiritual leader ever to take that path or preach it. Its roots were in his Hebrew tradition. The Prophet Isaiah knew the spiritual path would require metaphoric death by fire and water, and we would need to let go of our fear and trust that God would lead us through to the Promised Land.

The same path can be found in Islam. The 11th century Sufi mystic Ansari of Herat said, “Know that when you learn to lose yourself, you will reach the Beloved. There is no other secret to be learned, and more than this is not known to me.”

Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu, said “There comes a time when an individual becomes irresistible and his action becomes all-pervasive in its effect. This comes when he reduces himself to zero.”

In Taoism the Tao is a sacred Way that flows through the universe. To be in the Tao is to empty oneself out, the way a river is constantly emptying, always going lower, yet always being refilled with the Tao's power and virtue from above.

Paul wrote in the second chapter of Philippians, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself.... Therefore God also highly exalted him.”

Self-emptying was not just once for Jesus, it was a continuous practice. We do not need the River Jordan—we can enter the dark waters of meditation or centering prayer where we practice emptying ourselves of thoughts and feelings, letting them go as they flow by. We can enter the waters of mindfulness or heartfulness or welcoming practice, being simply present without the usual agenda of our ego. We can enter the waters of humbly and lovingly serving the needs of others, feeling and addressing their suffering, stretching to experience our true oneness with them, putting earth's needs and God's needs above our own.

These forms of kenosis lead us toward being zero, and then metanoia's transformation of consciousness leads us toward being one—one with God, one with our neighbor or enemy, one with all creation.

Oneness has been recognized as the key to individual and social well-being for thousands of years. The Golden Rule is made possible by it, the agape love of neighbor as our self—so traveling the path to oneness is worth whatever struggle it takes. Today the incentive is even higher because koinonia—the community of human civilization and survival of all living species—depends on us following the path to oneness.

Throughout the gospels Jesus assures us that his way leads to abundant and joyous life, so the Baptism of Christ with its symbolic meaning of death and resurrection is a cause for celebration, even as Jesus turns from the Jordan toward the wilderness and his confrontation with a corrupt society and the cross. We would not have a church today if it were not true that the love and comfort and miracles that come from the Spirit-filled life far outweigh the struggles and loss.

We do not have to see where our next step on this path is leading, all we need to do is have the courage and commitment to step into the waters of kenosis and undergo the fire of metanoia and trust that the Holy Spirit will show us how to love and serve God's realm in this time.

Let us pray in silence as an act of kenosis and a step on the path from zero to one...

**Haiku by Mel Goertz:**

Blessed with foothills and mountains,  
woodlands and streams.

Rays of light through the trees.