

## MOMENTS OF CLARITY

<sup>4</sup>John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup>Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

<sup>9</sup>In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup>And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' Mark 1:4-11, NRSV

We never know when an ordinary day will turn up something extraordinary. When typical mornings will turn into life changing days. The day we become engaged. The days our children are born. The day we run into someone unexpectedly and end up renewing the relationship.

My journey to this church started on just such a typical day. It would make a great story if I could stand here and tell you that when I saw the Associate position posted for The Congregational Church of Manhasset, I felt drawn to it, as if divinely guided. But in truth, the opposite is the case. It sat on my desk for weeks. I had just finished my exams for my masters at Boston University, and was in the midst of sending out resumes. But this application asked more of me than a ready-made resume. It had 4 essay questions. For a person who has just been depleted by comprehensive exams, this was a major turnoff. I remember picking up the application, and walking into the living room where Colleen sat on the couch. I complained about the essay questions and then I asked her, "Do you think I should bother with this?" If she had said no, I would have been relieved. I would have tossed it in the trash without a second thought. Instead, she suggested that I call the church to see if the position was even still available. And that's the moment my day turned from ordinary to extraordinary. I hit it off with Regina Paul, co-chair of the Search Committee, who had a soft spot in her heart for former Baptists and Southerners. She said the committee had already narrowed the field down to a handful, two of whom they were interviewing. Nevertheless, I should answer those essay questions and fax them to her ASAP. I did and my presence here some 8½ years later tells the end of the story. Those were some extraordinary days.

One morning 2,000 years ago John the Baptist, cousin of Jesus, woke up to what he assumed would be a normal day. Now I realize that from our perspective, there was nothing really normal about John the Baptist. He lived out in the wilderness, clothed himself in camel's hair, and ate locusts and wild honey. John was a prophet, another

departure from the norm. You had to be willing to tick off the religious leaders in order to hold down that job. The common people flocked to John to hear his message of repentance and his call to right living. Some people even thought that John might be the long-awaited messiah. But he made it clear that someone even more powerful was coming after him, someone who would baptize with something besides water, someone who would baptize with God's Holy Spirit.

While John's life was certainly not ordinary by any standards, he did experience what would have been to him, ordinary days. And so, on what seemed like just another normal day, John stood in the Jordan River baptizing all who came to repent. But on this ordinary day an extraordinary person came to be baptized: Jesus. Up to this point in his life, Jesus had not been a religious teacher. He had not healed anyone or worked other miracles. As far as we know, his young adulthood was typical.

It was not until this day that his life, by his own initiative, took a radical turn. For as John lowered Jesus into the water and brought him back up, suddenly the heavens opened and the Spirit of God descended onto Jesus like a dove. Scripture tells us that a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." Thus began both an earthly ministry and a new spiritual era, which continues to this day.

At his baptism, Jesus' life changed course. We cannot say for certain what led him to the banks of the Jordan River that day. Growing up, I was always taught that Jesus knew it was time to start his earthly ministry so he went to be baptized. But now I'm guessing it was much more complicated than that. I don't think Jesus was given a blueprint from God for every day of his life. Instead I believe that he grew up as a normal Jewish boy who, over time, came to understand his specific calling from God. I'm guessing that Jesus had been feeling in his heart that there was something special that God wanted him to do and over time he decided to check out what his cousin John, the religious zealot of the family, was up to. For all we know, this may have been an ordinary day for Jesus as he walked to the Jordan River. He may have been unsure about the specifics of God's calling and uncertain about his direction when John put him under the water. But any uncertainty about his call vanished as the heavens split open and he heard the voice of God.

What a moment of clarity, what a feeling of certainty, what a time of insight for Jesus. If he had any lingering doubts before, they were erased in this holy moment. With his wet hair plastered to his head and water dripping from his beard, Jesus found just the direction he needed to begin his earthly ministry.

Every once in a while, we start out on an ordinary day and at some point are granted an extraordinary gift, a moment of clarity, a moment when we grasp some insight into our lives or the life of the world. It happened in biblical times, and happens today. Think of Moses hearing God's voice at the burning bush and leading the Israelites to freedom. Think of the Apostle Paul on the road to Damascus. He'd built his reputation on persecuting Christians, but blinded by a heavenly light, he found his eyes opened to God's true desire for his life.

Our own experiences probably aren't nearly so dramatic, but many of us have had profound moments of clarity that influence our lives to this day. For many of us, the decision to marry arose from a moment of clarity about the person we wished to spend the rest of our lives with. Sometimes a moment of clarity comes when we realize it's time to end a bad relationship or start honestly dealing with an addiction. Sometimes it comes in a decision to change careers or move to a new area.

Perhaps we have a moment of clarity when we realize how blessed we are, and find ourselves wanting to give something back. Maybe one day we're coming home late from work, and we realize that our kids will be asleep by the time we get home. A moment of clarity hits us that we need to be more intentional about spending quality time with our family. Sometimes these moments come as insights into how we've been living our lives versus how we could be living our lives. Dissatisfaction provides us the opportunity to seek clarity about what we want to change.

I recently finished reading Alice Sebold's novel, *The Lovely Bones*. The book is a first-person account of a 14-year-old girl looking down from heaven, watching her family go from grief to the early stages of emotional healing. Late Monday night I couldn't put it down, so I ended up finishing it in the early hours of Tuesday morning. As I placed the book on the coffee table and headed up to bed, I had a moment of clarity. I realized how blessed I am with my wife and son and how I too often take them for granted. I decided I want to be more intentional in appreciating them and cherishing the gifts they are to me.

Moments of clarity can come from anywhere, including tragedy. In chapter 15 of Mark's Gospel we read about Christ's crucifixion. Immediately after Jesus died, a soldier standing nearby had a moment of clarity and uttered the words, "Truly this man was the Son of God" (15:39b). In the midst of the suffering and tragedy of Christ's death a guilty bystander realizes what he has done and to whom he has done it. The scriptures don't tell us what became of the soldier. He may have shrugged off the insight as an emotional overreaction, and gone about living his life as usual. Or he may have later heard about the resurrection and become one of Christ's followers. We don't know.

But this much we do know—that moments of clarity come for a purpose. From a Christian perspective, enlightenment for the sake of enlightenment, if it doesn't influence the way we live our lives, is of little use. Moments of clarity always bring us to a crossroad. They present us with choices. Will we continue on the path we've been traveling, or will we choose otherwise? Will we be satisfied with living our lives on autopilot, or will we open our minds and our hearts to something new? The choice is ours and ours alone. God can show us the path. God will accompany us in our journeys, as long as we take the first step.

After his encounter with the burning bush, Moses could have decided that the desert heat was getting to him. That God's voice was nothing more than a hallucination. He could have ignored the whole episode and continued his quiet life tending a flock. The Apostle Paul could have chalked up his encounter to his hectic schedule. Maybe he

was working too hard in his zealous pursuit of these Christians and simply needed to take it easy for a while. Even Jesus had a choice. He could have found the whole baptismal experience moving and all, but bargained with God that he needed more time to study the ancient scrolls, more time to pray in the temple, more time to live a normal life before starting off on a religious odyssey that might end badly. But he didn't. He acted on a moment of clarity, saying yes with his whole life.

It's amazing the things that can happen on normal, ordinary days. Profound, extraordinary experiences await those of us with ears to hear and eyes to see. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened" (Matthew 7:7-8, NRSV). Moments of clarity are not automatic, but if we are open to God, if we honestly ask and willingly search, a divine moment of clarity may come and thankfully, we may never be the same. AMEN.

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## **PASTORAL PRAYER**

Ever loving God, who listens when we pray, we thank you for being near us every moment of every day. Give us a greater sense of your presence in the stillness of our souls. Grant us moments of reflection and clarity that we might see life as it could be, not merely as it is. May we see our lives as you see them and take up the challenge to become more like you.

Surprise us, O God, that our ordinary days might be filled with extraordinary moments, gifts from on high. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. AMEN.