

**A New Hope**  
**The Monroe Congregational Church**  
**Rev. Jennifer Gingras**  
**January 12, 2014**

*Matthew 3:13-17, Acts 10:34-43*

Do you remember the first movie that you ever saw in the theater? What was it? I'm pretty sure that mine was Star Wars, Episode IV in 1977. It was the very first one they made, and was quite a big deal in its day. I was seven years old when I first saw it. Bonus points if you remember the subtitle of Episode IV... that's right, "A New Hope". We'll get back to that.

I can remember sitting next to my family and watching the screen of white text on a starry background as the picture began. You might remember the basic plot line: Luke Skywalker, raised by his aunt and uncle on the desert planet Tatooine, joins forces with a Jedi Knight named Obi-Wan Kenobi, a renegade pilot named Han Solo, Chewbacca the Wookiee and droids R2-D2 and C3PO to save the universe from the Empire's deadly Death Star, while also attempting to rescue Princess Leia from the evil Darth Vader. I don't know about you, but by the end of the movie I was pretty sure that I wanted to be Princess Leia when I grew up!

Just a few years later and the next episode, "The Empire Strikes Back" was released. The movie picked right up on the previous story: After the rebels have been brutally overpowered by the Empire, Luke takes advanced Jedi training with Master Yoda.

There is a pivotal moment towards the end of the film when Luke and Vader are engaged in a lightsaber duel. With Luke cornered and defenseless, Vader taunts him by telling him that he does not yet know the truth about his father. Luke responds, as he has been told over and over again by Obi Wan and others, that Vader killed him. With a deep gravelly voice, Lord Vader answers: "No. I am your father." And a horrified Luke screams his denial.

-----

I remember seeing this scene for the very first time and how deeply it affected me. You see, I was twelve years old – just beginning to form my identity like any other preteen. Where did I fit in? Who were my people? Did I belong? These are the normal questions that every young person asks at one time or another.

But it was also the time in my life when I was told that I had been adopted by my dad. I could relate to Luke Skywalker’s story. My biological father walked out on my mother when I was a few weeks old. His parental rights were terminated and they were divorced by the time I was beginning to walk.

The man who raised me as his own came into my mother’s life very soon after. In many ways, he saved both of our lives. There’s a picture of him standing next to my mom on the day I was baptized at about 9 months old. I wish that I could find it to show you, he’s standing next to her, holding me in his arms, smiling from ear to ear. In my mind’s eye I see the picture and know – deep in my heart, that he loved and accepted me as his own.

-----

Every time we baptize a child together in this church, we are invited to remember our baptism. Those who have been baptized as infants like I was may not be able to do that directly, but we are told stories and we see pictures that suggest promises to love and cherish and support us were made.

Some of us were baptized because our parents made that decision and they were doing what was expected. Others were baptized because we decided we were ready to join a faith community. And maybe a few of us here today have never been baptized because we’ve never seen a reason why we should be.

But I wonder if any of us really know the meaning of our baptisms?

Last week’s scripture reading told us about the Magi visiting the child and bringing gifts. Today, we skip ahead to Jesus as a thirty-year-old. We don’t have a clue as to what happened all those years in between.

One day Jesus puts down the tools of his trade, hangs a "Closed" sign on the door of his shop, and asks the important and question, "What does the Lord require of me?"

He heads south to find his cousin John, standing in the muddy Jordan in his camel-hair robe, smelling of locusts and honey. Jesus gets in line and waits his turn. He wades out into the water, right next to real live sinners like you and me.

While three Gospels tell the story of Jesus' baptism, only Matthew records the curious conversation between the two men. Jesus is eager to be baptized, but John hesitates. They stand hip-deep in the river and engage in a debate about who should baptize whom.

The first time Jesus speaks in Matthew's Gospel, it is to say that he needs to be baptized, because doing so will help him learn who he is meant to be. Jesus leans in to the water because he believes that God is calling him to a different kind of life.

When Jesus stands up, the waters of the Jordan dripping down his face, he sees the Spirit descending like a dove to rest upon his soggy head. The Spirit comes, not as an all-consuming fire of judgment, but with the flutter of hopeful wings. And a voice says: "You are my child. I love you. I'm delighted with you."

Then Jesus goes into the desert wilderness for forty days to think about what it means to be God's child. He spends all the days and years that follow discovering the meaning of his baptism, and takes his place with hurting people. Baptism was Jesus' commissioning to ministry.

In the week before his arrest, trial and crucifixion, the leaders of the temple questioned Jesus, saying: "By what authority are you doing these things?" (Matthew 21:23). He answers by remembering his baptism: "Was the baptism of John from heaven or not? I was baptized. That's why I do the things I do." In the waters of baptism, Jesus heard the Spirit calling him to speak the truth and live with grace.

-----

Sometimes it takes a while to understand why any decision we make is significant. Baptism, like other moments of initiation, takes on more meaning as live into it. What does it mean to you to live out your baptism?

When we are true to our baptisms, we struggle with what's right and what's wrong, what's important and what's not.

We learn to:

tell the truth in a world that often lies,  
to give in a world that takes,  
to love in a world that lusts,  
to make peace in a world that fights,  
to serve in a world that tells us to put ourselves first,  
to pray in a culture that waits to be entertained,  
and to take chances in a world that worships safety.

I know that being that being true to our baptism can be exhausting. It takes trust and vulnerability. We make mistakes. People let us down. Too often we rush to judgment and condemn those we don't understand or who try our patience. Our efforts go unappreciated, or we feel like whatever we do is just a drop in the bucket against so much pain and evil.

Baptism is but a beginning.

And it's also our vow to keep trying.

It's a promise to live with more concern for the hurting than for our own comfort.

It's a reminder to struggle with ideas and situations that oppress others.

It's the commitment to share our time with the poor and listen to the lonely, and feel our connection to God become stronger.

Remember your baptism, remember your call, it is a New Hope.

-----