



God on the Trapeze Bar



A Sermon By
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January 10, 2016

Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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Isaiah 43:1-7

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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The First Sunday After the Epiphany
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Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

Isaiah 43:1

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Luke 3:21-22

One beautiful, fall day, early in my freshman year in college, my roommate and I made a trip over to the Lost and Found. He had left his favorite sweatshirt lying somewhere around campus and was hoping someone had picked it up and turned it in. Lost and Found was located in the University Center, and when we got there, I sat on a bench while my roommate spoke with the person at the counter.

As I waited, I noticed a young woman walking by. She saw me, too, and, she did a double take, as if some thought had been triggered in her mind; but, without any sign of hesitating, she just kept going. And, then suddenly, a few steps later, she stopped. She turned in my direction and headed over.

"Excuse me," she said. "Aren't you from New York?"

Although I did not remember, the two of us had met before, at one of those regional events colleges offer for incoming students and their families. I had attended with my parents, and she was there, as well, serving on the panel of current students, who talked about the school and what it was like.

As the two of us stood there in the University Center, laughing as we recalled that event, we quickly discovered we had other things in common: we came from neighboring towns and lived about 15 minutes apart; we knew many of the same people and places; we even went to the same orthodontist when we were younger.

The two of us only talked for a few minutes that day, when my roommate reappeared, with a big smile on his face, and his sweatshirt in his hand. "I've got to go," I said to the girl. "It was nice to meet you," and with that, my roommate and I walked away, heading off to the gym to play basketball.

As we left the University Center, my roommate gave me this look. “Who was that?” he asked, with a smile and nod of his head, and as only guys can do, I said, “I don’t know. Just some girl.”

I didn’t realize it at the time, but that chance meeting with the girl in the University Center changed my life, because that wasn’t just some girl, that we THE girl. Unbeknownst to me, I had crossed some invisible threshold, from one stage of life to another, and the person who I was began the slow evolution into the person I would become.

Moments like that happen to all of us over the course of life’s journey. Looking back, we can see how different phases of our life began at some key transition point when we left behind one way of being and entered into another. Sometimes we can see these thresholds approaching: we go off to college; we start a new job; we have kids; we retire. But, a lot of the time, we have no warning, no preparation. The threshold just opens suddenly before us, when we meet the person we will marry, or we lose our job, or someone we love succumbs to an illness. In no time at all, our lives change irreversibly. We find ourselves standing on completely strange ground with a new life to be embraced, and even if we want to go back, to return to the way things were, we can’t, because we’re not the same person anymore.¹

Like the rest of us, Jesus experienced many such moments in his lifetime, and we witness one this morning in our Gospel story. Jesus’ baptism signified an important turning point for him. Emerging from the water, seeing the heavens open, the Spirit descending, hearing that voice, it was a powerful awakening for Jesus. In that moment, he had realize who he was, what his calling would be, what was his to do and accomplish, and it marked new beginning, a new stage in his life and work and ministry.

Jesus’ baptism was so important it is described in all four of the Gospels, and the Gospel of Mark actually begins with Jesus’ baptism. In Mark, there is no Christmas story: no Bethlehem, no manger, no shepherds or angels. Mark’s whole story starts in the river – that is how meaningful the moment was.

As Jesus stood there, completely soaked, water running down from his head, he must have felt a great sense of affirmation – now he knew why God put him here on earth – and yet, at the same time, I have to believe he also felt some tinge of doubt and apprehension and insecurity.

I say that because we all feel that way when we cross an important threshold. It doesn't matter that we have been through transitions before and always come out okay. Every new threshold is like starting over. We don’t know what to expect, and we are never quite know how it will turn out. It is the reason we find change so difficult and scary. We know there are no guarantees, no insurance policy we can purchase, no certainty of what is going to happen and how it will end.

The writer, Danaan Parry, describes life as a series of trapeze swings, in which we are either

¹ John O’Donohue – To Bless the Space Between Us

hanging on to a trapeze bar and swinging along just fine, feeling we are totally in control, or for a few, brief moments, we are hurtling through the air across completely empty space.

As Parry says:

Every once in a while, as I am merrily swinging along, I look out ahead of me into the distance and see another trapeze bar swinging toward me. It's empty and I know, in that place of me that knows, that this new trapeze bar has my name on it. It is my next step, my growth, my aliveness coming to get me, and in my heart of hearts, I know... I must release my grip on the present.²

That is what it is like to make a transition and cross a threshold. We have to let go of the present and reach for the future. We must release our grip on one bar and grab on to the other, and that can be terrifying because, for a few, brief moments, we are caught in between. We are just hanging there in mid-air, not holding onto anything, and we know, we know, it is a long way down.

I believe Jesus felt that way as he stood in the Jordan River. Jesus was human, too, and knew all of the same feelings, all of the same emotions, all of the same fears as you and me. Yet, Jesus also knew that God was with him. He knew God was with him in the river, as he let go of the past and reached for the future. God was with him as he moved from one bar to the next. God was with him for those few, brief, terrifying moments. God was with him, and God wasn't going to let him fall.

God is with us, too, as we are swinging on the bar and hurtling through the air.

Making a transition and crossing a new threshold is always scary and challenging. It demands courage and faith and trust, but knowing God is there with us, swinging right alongside... we don't have to fear the falling as much, and we might just learn how to fly.

Amen.

² Danaan Parry, *Warriors of the Heart*.