Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

First Sunday after Epiphany

The Baptism of Jesus

January 7, 2018

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HEAVEN TOUCHES EARTH Genesis 1:1–5

Mark 1:4–11

I have always been fascinated with the comparison between the birth of Jesus and the birth of the Buddha. As for the birth of the Buddha, the story goes that his mother, Queen Maya, after her dream of a white elephant and the sign that she would give birth to a great leader, found that she was expecting a child. She asked the King if she could go back home, to her father’s house, in order to give birth to the child, as was the custom of the day.

The King granted her wish, and as the time approached for her to give birth, a grand procession of soldiers and retainers set out for the Kaliya country of India. On the way, the procession passed a garden called Lumbini Park located in Nepal at the foot of the Himalayas. There, in the park, with its grand sala trees and scented flowers and birds and bees, the baby was born. The auspicious birth took place on a full moon. According to legend, the baby began to walk seven steps forward and at each step a lotus flower appeared on the ground. Then, at the seventh step, the Buddha spoke with a noble voice, saying:

*“I am chief of the world,*

*Eldest am I in the world,*

*Foremost am I in the world.*

*This is the last birth.*

*There is now no more coming to be.”*

When the Queen returned to the King and her home in Kapilavatthu, there was rejoicing all over the country.[[1]](#footnote-1)

I have described the Buddha’s birth in some detail in order to contrast his birth with the birth of Jesus. The Buddha was born in royal splendor surrounded by retainers and soldiers. Jesus was born in earthly obscurity in a barn because there was no room in the inn, surrounded by cattle and shepherds. The Buddha proclaimed himself to be the foremost in the world and was acclaimed by all. King Herod viewed the baby Jesus as a threat and tried to have him killed. It has been said that Jesus was born a beggar and a pauper, and later was proclaimed to be a king by his followers. The Buddha, in contrast, was born a King and then left the royal palace to become an itinerant beggar.

I, for one, am glad for the Christian story. I like the idea that Jesus was born in earthly obscurity and poverty, because if this is his origin, then there is hope for the likes of me. There is hope for the likes of us. For who among us is of noble birth? Which brings me to recall my grandmother MacPherson who prided herself on being born a Kierstead, her maiden name. For her, nothing could be more important than having the name of Kierstead. They were related to Dutch royalty, she maintained. She used to make Grandfather MacPherson take her to the area surrounding Kierstead Mountain in New Brunswick, where she took delight in pointing out where this or that Kierstead had once lived. “This is the house where the famous musician, so and so Kierstead lived,” she said. And, passing by another house, she said, “this is the house where so and so Kierstead, the well-known mathematician lived.” This went on for a while, until Grandfather MacPherson pointed to a house and said, “And that is where the Kierstead who killed his wife with an ax lived,” to which Grandmother replied, “Oh, but he was not from our side of the family.” ‘Oh, yes, he was,” replied Grandfather. So much for nobility! As Saint Paul would remind the members of the Church in Corinth:

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters,

not many of you were wise by human standards,

not many were powerful, not many were of

noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in

the world to shame the wise; God chose what is

weak in the world to shame the strong; God

chose what is low and despised in the world,

things that are not, to reduce to nothing things

that are, so that no one might boast in the

presence of God. —1 Corinthians 1:26–29

Yes, I am glad that Jesus was born in earthly obscurity and poverty and vulnerability, because that means there is hope for us. We too can become God’s beloved sons and daughters.

The humble, earthly origins of Jesus plays into the story of his baptism as recorded in the Gospel of Mark. John the Baptist is conducting his baptisms for the forgiveness of sins in the river Jordan, and we read: “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.” In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus simply appears from out of nowhere, really. In this Gospel, there is no genealogy, no royal pedigree. There is no mention of a royal lineage going back to King David. There are no accounts of Jesus’s birth. There is simply this man called Jesus who comes from Nazareth in Galilee, far from the seat of political and religious power. Chad Myers, in his commentary, says that to say that Jesus is from Nazareth in Galilee is much like saying that he is from “Nowheresville.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Yet, when this Jesus, who appears from “Nowheresville” is baptized by John, just as he is coming out of the water, the heavens tear apart, and John sees the Sprit descend upon Jesus, and a voice from heaven comes, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:11).

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, as this morning’s reading from the Hebrew Scriptures declares. Now, at the baptism of Jesus, heaven replies to earth and declares Jesus to be God’s own beloved son. Heaven gives its stamp of approval upon this unknown human being called Jesus who arrives on the scene from earthly obscurity, from the edge of human existence and clothed with human ordinariness.

This, my sisters and brothers, is the Christian story. And because this is the Christian story, you and I, just poor, ordinary human beings, weak and flawed, are also given the grace to become God’s beloved children. And it matters not that we are not of noble birth, or that our congregation is not at the center of social or political power. It matters not in the sight of God, for heaven dwells among us. And we have come to know that our mission in the world is to be present among the least in the world, to be in solidarity with the homeless poor and the hungry and the weak and the vulnerable, with all for whom Jesus was born and lived and died and rose again. How appropriate that on this Sunday when we celebrate the baptism of Jesus and heaven’s endorsement of all that is of the earth, all that is lowly and ordinary, that we should hear from Duane Kurisu who with courage and vision is providing homes for the homeless. May we listen and envision our own response to the needs of our world and its people.

Yes, we thank God for calling forth Jesus, God’s Beloved Son, from earthly ordinariness and obscurity, from “Nowheresville” and leading him to be baptized by John in the river Jordan. Like him, we too have come from nowhere and have been baptized in his name. And as God named him God’s beloved Son, so God names us. We are God’s beloved sons and daughters. Can you believe that heaven has touched earth and us? Oh, my sisters and brothers, can you believe it? Amen.

1. *“Life of Buddha: Birth of the Prince (part 1)*, Kadampa.org/e-

   learning/Buddhism/lifebuddha/2bud.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Chad Myers, *Binding the Strong Man* (new York: Orbis Books, 2000) 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)