

# *Approaching God*

*Bible Reading:*  
*Exodus 19: 9-25*  
*Matthew 3: 1-12*

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It's one of the hottest places I've ever worked - as well as one of the most intimidating -  
A blast furnace.

Iron ore pellets are dropped into the top of a large tower. As they fall to the bottom through a raging upward blow of heated air they begin to melt. By the time they get to the bottom of the furnace they've melted. And in that environment, which reaches temperatures up to 1500°C, the iron is separated out from the impurities, the slag. The liquid iron is then poured out and moved on to the next step of the steel making process. That's the stage shown in this picture.

Safety officers, as you can imagine, are on everyone's case. There is no margin for error. No room for complacency. We're talking life and death in the face of this enormous energy and power.

And yet -  
hey -  
it's **only** a steel plant; it's **just** a blast furnace.

Small potatoes when compared to, say, the power of a nuclear explosion.  
Which, in turn, is small potatoes when compared to that raging inferno of ongoing nuclear reaction which we know as the sun.

Which, in turn, is small potatoes  
**nothing** actually  
when compared to the power of the Creator of the sun.

And yet.....  
yet.....  
Here we are, gathered in worship,  
and claiming to actually be in the presence of God!

Is that true?  
Can that be?  
How dare we say such things?  
How dare we baptise little Ella and claim that the overwhelming power of Creator God is with her?

Read with me about what happened when an ancient group of people were told,  
*"Prepare to meet God!"*

#### **EXODUS 19: 9-25**

Prepare yourselves!  
Consecrate yourselves!  
Get ready!

And they get about the business of cleaning their clothes.  
They're told that one of the most basic elements of marital life was off-limits.  
Not because it was wrong.  
But just to help drive home how important this upcoming meeting with God was. Nothing else would be allowed to distract the peoples' focus.

God comes.

The mountain shakes.  
The people tremble.  
Only Moses can go up. The others are all barred.  
    God's great power and holiness are too much.  
    It's overwhelming!

As you read this, you've got to understand  
    that the God of Mt. Sinai is the same God we worship.

His power has not diminished one megaton, not one tiny bit.  
Though our awareness of it may well have.

A few years ago a fellow by the name of Don McCullough wrote a book entitled, "*The Trivialization Of God*". He suggested that a lot of people in North America have become incredibly complacent about God;  
    that we've come up with cheap ideas in our minds;  
    trying to replace Him with some two-bit imaginary deity who serves our self-image, satisfies our wants and whims, and politely ducks into or out of our lives as a butler of sorts - always at our service.  
Do you think McCullough may have had a point?

How did you prepare for worship today?  
Where did God factor into this past week for you?

At the end of the era of Moses, a man named John came, who - like Moses - was charged with the task of telling the people to prepare to meet God -  
    this time the Son of God.

Please join us in reading of that:

### **MATTHEW 3: 1-12**

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

John calls the people to wake up, to make changes in their lives, to clean them up - not just in words, but also through their actions.

"Repent!"

    John preached.

    And along with the preaching he used an image, a symbol to help drive the point home in peoples' lives of the need to wash up, clean up, their lives.

"You really want things to be different? You really want your life to be fully submitted to God? You really want everything to be coloured by this commitment to faithfulness? You do? Then here's a symbol to remind you of that commitment and step you've taken."

The symbol he chose had its roots in the textile industry, in clothing manufacturing. There cotton and flax fibres were spun and woven into fabric for domestic use. But the natural fibres were of varying hues and shades. There were blemishes and stains, perhaps dirt marks that simply couldn't be removed by washing. So the fabric was dipped into a vat of dye and coloured - every thread the same.

    That process of dipping the fabric into the dye vat was called *baptizo*.

    In English we have from it the word *baptize*.

John would preach. The people would come in response.  
And they would go down into the river to be covered by water, dipped in,  
    - baptized -

a symbol of their desire to be totally cleaned up  
and coloured fully as servants of God.

More than just being cleaned up a bit, or having a few dirt spots washed out, baptism was a symbol of change -  
deep, through and through change, like the through and through change that happens to fabric in the dye vat.

John's baptism, along with all of John's ministry, pointed ahead to Jesus;  
the One who came after Him.

The One who came after John,  
Jesus, the Son of God  
who came to earth declaring:  
"I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me." (John 14:6)

Jesus - who made no bones about saying that the God of great power can only be approached,  
in this life  
and in the eternity to come  
God can only be approached through Jesus.

Jesus - who came as intermediary between God and humanity - like Moses.  
Only unlike Moses, he came not to keep people away,  
not to build fences  
but to break down barriers between heaven and earth.

Jesus came  
to bear the curse of all our sin, all our wrong, all our evil  
to die in our place so that we may live.  
to die in our place so that no longer do we have to heed warnings on the day of worship;  
warnings to stand back and stay clear of the presence of God lest we die.

Jesus came to be a bridge through whom we can freely come to the Almighty.  
That's the heart and the soul of the Christian faith.  
Everything in Christian living begins there.  
Without this, there is nothing.  
No claim on that holy power of God.  
No chance to enter His presence.  
No right to bend His ear in prayer.

We symbolize all of that through the ritual we performed with Ella this morning.  
The sacred act, the *sacrament*, of holy baptism.

Claiming, believing that the shed blood of Jesus cleans her up better than any Jordan river water could; better  
than any wash tub near Mount Sinai could.  
The cleansing work of Jesus cleans Ella right to the deepest core of her being.

Think again of her baptism -  
- the water sprinkled onto her, running down her head -  
think about that as you hear these words from the book of Hebrews;  
words about entering the presence of God.  
Only - these are not stern words of warning.  
Rather, they are welcoming words of invitation.

Listen:

*“...let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.” (Hebrews 10)*

The ancient Hebrew people were told to get ready for their meeting with God by washing their clothes. John's audience was told to get ready to meet God by taking a *baptizo* bath. We bathe in Jesus.

No literally in Him, but trusting that the water of baptism represents His blood:

- the blood of Christ that was sacrificed for us;
- the blood that ran down the cross, where Jesus, the Son of God hung in suffering humiliation, carrying the guilt, the shame, the burden for the sins, stains, smudges and evil blotches on our lives.

By his suffering and death, by the shedding of His blood, we are set free from the curse and domination of evil and sin and eternal death.

We are set free. We are changed.

Baptism - being recoloured, dyed, spiritually.

It is a symbol, a sacred action - sacrament - that Jesus commanded the Church to use. Which it has, for 2000 years. Which is why we did what we did this morning with Gabriella Hope Brinkman.

Ella -

You are claimed by the God, whose power is all-consuming.  
You belong to Him!

You have not a warning to stay away, but an invitation into the presence of God. An invitation that is good throughout your life.

An invitation that is good into eternity.

An invitation that will, as you are able, call for your personal response.

John and Annette, and members of Ella's church family here at Calvin -

It's up to us to remind her of this invitation and response.

Ella is one incredibly blessed and privileged little girl.

She is blessed to be born into the community of faith.

She is blessed to belong to a family where she will receive the stories of faith, the examples of parents and significant others; the blessings of church school and clubs and societies and bible camps and christian day schools.

Through all those forms it is our prayer that she will experience an encounter with Almighty God.

Not an encounter that strikes terror in her heart,  
but one that will draw her in.

It's my prayer that she respond - with full devotion, rather than the complacency that so many in our society seem to show.

It's my prayer that beyond the flowing of water over the outside of her body

Ella would respond to the inner flow which even now is moving through her, the flow of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit who brings the earth shaking power of heaven to bear in a positive, purifying way to all believers.

Which is what John meant when he said that the One coming after him would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Those who submit their lives, surrender themselves to Jesus Christ, receive not only the dipping of baptism, but also the dipping of the Holy Spirit.

The divine, spiritual God power of the Holy Spirit works right into the warp and woof, right into the very weave of the fabric of our lives.

The divine power of God begins to change us:

- Our attitudes
- thinking process
- language
- the way we treat other people
- our view of creation; care for, stewardship of the cosmos.

We begin to reflect the will of the Lord in all these areas.  
It becomes a part of who we are.

That is a process, a life-long process.

It is a life-colouring process that happens in community.

It begins when we enter the community of Jesus and doesn't end until He calls us out of this life into eternity.

Baptized - with water and the Spirit

Dyed in the colour of God.

My friends - Just about every single one of you here today has been baptised.

God has laid His holy claim on your life.

A claim that is possible to resist;

a claim that, if resisted, will result in another baptism one day.

a baptism of fire

The fire of the judgement of God which will burn up and destroy all that is evil and impure on the final day of reckoning.

It is my prayer that this not be experienced by a single person here.

And so - in the name of Jesus hear this challenge.

We've had the privilege to witness the waters of baptism applied to little Ella Brinkman.

We've seen her enter into, begin, the life-long journey of faith.

We've promised to help her along the way; to assist her as best we can to become a believer that is thoroughly soaked in the colouring of the Master.

We've had that privilege.

Now's also the opportunity to re-examine our own lives and ask, "Dear Jesus, could there be parts of me that I've held back from you, where I've put up a fence of my own, where I've tried to build a barrier between God and me, where I've pounded in an 'out of bounds' sign for the Holy Spirit?"

If you've got those corners of your life, today is the day to rip down those signs.

Today is the day to recommit ourselves to the ongoing baptizing work of the Spirit; to pray for his purifying power to flow through us and cleanse us.

I don't know where that especially applies for you.

Today that's between you and the Lord.

Just - whatever you do,

Please don't put it off.

Today is a day for renewed commitment - for all of us.

So that one day,

when all the coverings will be ripped back and we will stand before the full force of the power of God in eternity,

we won't have to be afraid.

But instead we can anticipate and know for sure that we will hear -  
- for **Jesus**' sake we will hear:

Welcome!

Welcome home, my child!

Join me in prayer.