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In This Way...Open

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One of my most vivid memories of early in the pandemic was a press conference that included the governor, Minnesota congressional leaders and a guy named Andrew Zimmern. Andrew Zimmern was familiar to me as I had watched several of his cooking/travel shows over the years and there he was, on TV talking about how important it was to close our restaurants and bars. Closing our gathering places. And then he talked about how hard it was going to be for those establishments, and some would not make it. Some would close and never reopen.

And another vivid memory is standing in an empty sanctuary on a Sunday morning, live streaming whatever worship we could put together after having taped a note to the front door of the church saying that the church was closed. Then watching several cars pull up, read the sign, and drive away. Some churches would close and never reopen too.

All of this, and lots, lots more, was a shock to all our systems. Who are we now? Where are we going? What is going to happen? When those questions begin to swirl in many moments of life, I turn to one story in the Gospel of Luke to start the journey of finding the answers to those questions and many more. It's the story of the baptism of Jesus. However, Luke tells this story very differently than the Gospel of Matthew and Mark and his version has been really important to me.

Here is the story as told by Matthew - *And when Jesus had been baptized, just as He came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to Him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on Him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."* Matthew 3:16-17

Now there have been times in my life when an event happens and immediately the meaning of that event is revealed with complete clarity. Like coming up out of the water and all is revealed.

However, my life seems to follow the baptism story in the Gospel of Luke more often than not. *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

Did you hear the difference. In Matthew and Mark the revelation is immediate. In Luke the revelation comes only after Jesus is praying. Revelation comes through a pattern of prayer. And yes, Jesus gives us several different patterns of prayer. Our worship series during the season of Lent is titled "In this Way..." Jesus through His life teaches us to pray "In this Way..." and this first week we start with the prayer pattern of being open. What do we think Jesus was praying for in Luke's baptism story? I think Jesus was praying to be open to whatever God had next for Him. Being open to God's guidance. Being open to God's revelation, whatever it would be. And in being open through prayer, Jesus first heard who He was. Being open through prayer He was reminded that He was a child of God. And then being open through prayer He heard what it meant to be a child of God – Beloved. A treasure and then being open through prayer Jesus heard the affirmation from God that He needed, with You I am well pleased. Or... I take delight in You, my child. And then, only after Jesus' identity was established did Jesus enter the wilderness.

In the Gospel of Luke, all of that comes as Jesus prays and is open to God's revelation. And so there we were, a group of us in an empty sanctuary, with a closed sign taped to the front door. This was a very different type of baptism – but it was a baptism none the less. A baptism into a new and forever changed world. Would we reopen? When? How? And if we really wanted to be serious... why? So, we began to be open through prayer. To be open to God's voice. To be open to God's revelation. And in the beginning, we heard very similar things – we are God's beloved children with whom God takes great delight. Hold tight to that because in the wilderness those words mean everything. There is the answer to our why.

Ok, now keep praying and being open. And God was faithful and revealed a way forward that was deeply impactful for our church and for our community. We had more clarity than we had in years and years, and not only did we reopen but we grew in our faith and in church membership.

Now of course there is a different pattern of prayer. Instead of being open through prayer we can be tempted to be closed through prayer. Only asking God what we want, being closed to God's revelation – treating prayer like a vending machine... which can lead us to selfishness and ultimately disappointment as we fail to recognize God's revelation in other ways. Don't get me wrong... there is nothing wrong with praying with specificity, praying directly, asking God directly but this prayer pattern – being open through prayer opens us to all kinds of revelations some that we may never have even considered.

As we move into this season of lent, what's been closed in your life? What Andrew Zimmern has come to you with bad news? Are you asking the questions of when, where, how, and maybe even why? How are you praying? Are you open? But before you get too deep in the wilderness know this to be absolutely true... You are God's beloved child with whom God takes great delight. Did you hear that? You are God's beloved child with whom God takes great delight. Do you feel it? You are God's beloved child with whom God takes great delight. Oh yes you are. That's who you are. The wilderness is real... but those words are even more real. You are God's beloved child with whom God takes great delight. Open yourself through prayer to that.