

**Isaiah 42: 1-9**  
**Matthew 3: 13-17**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**  
**January 12, 2014**

As I prepared to write this sermon, out of nowhere came this thought: What if we lived in a country where gathering for Christian worship in general and baptizing in particular was illegal? In the Soviet Union while not literally against the law, Christian worship was seen as a subversive act. KGB agents attended worship and kept track of who attended. People who were public Christians had their phones tapped and were harassed. To bring a child for baptism was especially discouraged as it perpetuated the superstition that the atheist state was trying to stamp out.

What if we lived in such a nation? Would we gather for worship and endure the hostility of the police and our neighbors? In the 1960's and early 70's it was the radical left which declared that the United States was a police state. In this era a similar message comes from the radical right. This was a dangerous and twisted message then. It is a dangerous and twisted message now. We live in a land where we can say outrageous things and not go to jail. We can gather here on this house of worship to celebrate the reality of a loving God who we believe loved the world so much that he sent Jesus to reveal his love to humanity. A love which caused God in Jesus to take up frail human flesh and experience the joy and anguish of our mortal lives first hand.

Did God have to do this? Certainly not! We are created in God's image. There is that of God in each and every one of us. Our joys are his joys. Our sorrows are his sorrows. Our acts of injustice and oppression cause him anger on behalf of the oppressed and hand wringing

frustration with us. God did not need to come personally. He came in human form so that *we* would get the message. That is why Jesus is the Word, the Message made flesh. God became human not so that he would know, but that *we* would know.

We gather freely this morning to remember that Jesus was not just born in human flesh, he underwent the baptism at the hand of John the Baptist. John's baptism was for the forgiveness of sins in order to prepare a person to receive the life of the messiah. Jesus had no sins to forgive. He was the messiah. Did he need to be baptized? Certainly not! But he accepted baptism so that we would know that he shared our life completely. He accepted John's baptism so that there would be no sense in which we could say, "Jesus stands aloof from my life. He is too pure for me." Jesus accepted baptism not so *he* would know but so *we* would know and so trust our whole lives to his care and compassion.

Thus it is that we gather freely and joyfully to celebrate the fact that this great love is promised to Nathaniel. It is his birthright. Jesus has been born, baptized, lived, died and risen from the dead for Nathaniel and for every child of God. Do we baptize Nathaniel because God does not know Nathaniel is his child? Of course not! Nathaniel is created in God's image. All that God has done in and through Jesus Christ is accomplished. We baptize Nathaniel not that *God* will know Nathaniel is God's child. We do not baptize Nathaniel so that *we* will know he is God's child. No, we baptize Nathaniel so that *he* will come to know the love of God in Jesus Christ for himself.

We do this freely and joyfully; but with seriousness of intent. For those who from whatever ideology oppose freedom of religion are right about one thing. Faith in the love of God in Jesus *is subversive*. We have an allegiance to a power higher than any earthly power—

to the *really real* of God's kingdom. We have the promise of a love beyond all earthly love; and a life that reaches beyond this mortal life to the wonder of a life to come. Amen.