

For the people of St. Philip's
Year A, 1 Epiphany
January 13, 2008
Maria Hoecker, preacher
Matthew 3:13-17

We humans are creatures of habit. I don't know about you, but I do a lot of things without thinking about it. Most of the time I think most of us are operating on automatic pilot. It's not all bad, we creatures of habit *like* predictable routines.

For instance, have you ever walked into a dark room and flicked the light switch even though you knew that the power was off? Everyone knows that the lights won't come on without electricity. But we try to turn them on anyway. And even after we realize that the power is off we keep flicking the light switch anyway to no avail. Habit. Or you work and work to get a lamp turned on, change the bulb, turn the switch, and then later discover that you forgot to plug it in? Maybe it's just me that does that.

The lights won't come on if the power is off. This is a universal truth that can be seen in creation itself. In Genesis it says that the universe was a vast dark chaos before God began creating. It says that "darkness covered the face of the deep." But before God can start making something of this vast darkness it says the wind or breath of God swept over the face of the deep. Then God said, "Let there be light!"

Before God could turn the lights on, the universe had to be plugged in to a power source. And that power source is the Spirit, or presence, of God. Without the Spirit of God the universe would still be a dark place. You or I could flick the switch all day and it would still be dark.

Since this is a universal principle, that the lights won't come on without the power on, it also applies to each of us. After all we are part of this creation. If the universe cannot run without a power source, then neither can we.

Perhaps we can see this principle at work in Jesus' own life. Matthew writes, "Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him." For most of his first 30 years Jesus lived in Nazareth. We know very little about his life there. He was probably a carpenter: he seemed to live a fairly peaceful and ordinary existence. In those days Jesus left that life and began a new life. He left the comfort and security of Nazareth to begin traveling to teach and heal. Instead of his bed in Nazareth Jesus slept on the ground. He left a peaceful existence for a life destined to end on the cross.

In those same days John was baptizing in the Jordan River. People flocked to John because they had turned from God and desperately needed and wanted to turn back. They wanted to turn from their old lives of selfishness and hate and turn to a new life of loving God and their neighbor. So they repented and John baptized them to demonstrate God's forgiveness. And Jesus, who was among them, came to be baptized as well.

But Jesus didn't need to repent! Jesus, unlike all other humans, had never turned from God. He was sinless. He had nothing to repent of. But like them, Jesus was leaving his old life behind. And like them, Jesus was being obedient to God. He was surrendering to God's will for his life. So, despite John's objections, Jesus was baptized.

Right after Jesus was baptized something important happened: the heavens were torn open. Imagine what that must have looked like?

It is important to note that the heaven was torn open, because the Spirit that descended on Jesus was the Spirit of God. The power of the Holy Spirit, sent from God, was descending on and filling the Son. And God said, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." With this mighty ripping open of the heavens, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove, the gentlest of birds.

Jesus' power came from above; from God. Without the pervasive power of God, Jesus could not have done the things that he did. He could not have healed the sick or cast out demons. He could not have multiplied the loaves or calmed the sea. He could not have forgiven his disciples for deserting him. He could not have willingly died for the same men who nailed him to the cross. He could not have been the Lamb of God slain for the sins for the world. Jesus was born the Son of God.

He was God in the flesh. He didn't need an infusion of power to work miracles. He *was* that power, incarnate. He IS that power, Incarnate. But at the baptism of Jesus, God showed us his Beloved, with whom God was well-pleased. God showed us all this.

Jesus was able to live as he did because he was the Light of God. He was able to shine as light in the darkness because the power of the Holy Spirit was shining bright.

Imagine trying to be a Christian without drawing your energy from the Light of Christ? How much of what we do around here is just habit? Without the regular discipline of prayer, worship, and reading God's Word --our lights would begin to flicker from lack of energy. Just try to labor for Christ's Church without looking TO Christ, and soon your energy will fade to nothing, you'll begin to feel unplugged. I know that's when it feels like I am standing in the dark flicking a light switch without even realizing that I forgot to plug in my lamp.

We can't live a truly Christian life on our own. The only way to live a Christian life is to empty ourselves and be filled with spiritual power by grace as faithful followers of Jesus Christ. God won't ever turn off the power, it is up to us to plug into it. The light in our lamp won't come on if we aren't plugged in.

It's tempting in this culture for each of us to seek our own source of spiritual energy - our own version of God. There are plenty of places to find God, to be sure, but not all roads we choose point to God. Sometimes we make a wrong turn. But God's Word always waits for us in Holy Scripture. God's love is always rushing toward us through the Power of the Holy Spirit. God always feeds us through the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ-- We don't just receive this gift at the altar rail - we are fed by coming together in our ministries each week as One *within* the Body of Christ. We dwell IN Christ. We can't do this on our own. We are wired, by virtue of our own baptism, into the source of God's power. We can not do it alone.

We are human. We will always be tempted to unplug ourselves from regular prayer, worship, and study of Scripture. It's human nature occasionally to think that we've moved past all that. We hear it from the kids all the time, "I've heard that story before," they will say. "Don't you have any new ones?" But the lights won't come on if the power is unplugged. God is our only power source for abundant life. Let God's loving Light fill you with the Spirit and work through you. Seek to hear the stories again and again. Pray, Worship, study God's Word.

Then stand back and watch the lights come on in your life.

Sources: Rev. Alex Stevenson: lights on /power off metaphor and some solid theology from the Sermon on the Baptism of Jesus by Martin Luther. [PDF] "This is My Son, the Beloved": Sermon on the Baptism of Jesus