

*PATTERNS IN THE SNOW*

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Text: Matthew 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. 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."

**H**as anyone ever heard of a guy named Simon Beck? He's a former cartographer turned snow artist, and in the wintertime he walks around in snow shoes and makes patterns in the snow that look like crop circles. He described it once as map-making in reverse. "You start with the map," he said, "and you need to make the ground agree with the map." I put some pictures of his work in the slideshow out in the narthex, if you want to take a look after the service. They're pretty amazing. Each pattern is about the size of a football field; they can take up to eleven hours to complete; and they can require up to 25 miles of walking.

But what's really interesting to me about snow art is how it's only visible from high up. Up close, at ground level, you can't make out the pattern. It doesn't look like anything. All you see are a bunch of messy tracks and maybe a random shape or two. Even Beck needs a compass to guide him. Otherwise he'd be completely lost. But when you're looking down from above, everything

comes together, and you can see all the connections.

What a great metaphor that is for life. Close up, at ground level, our lives look messy and random. If we take a single day, or a single week, or even a single year, it's hard to make out any kind of pattern. All we see are tracks going this way and that, criss-crossing and doubling-back and looping around—the twists-and-turns our paths have taken; the forks in the road we've come to; the dead ends we've reached where had to find another way to go forward. But when we look down from a higher perspective, so to speak, when we take a longer view over time, then everything comes together, and we can see all the connections. When we look back over ten years or 20 years or 50 years, then we can see the complexity, and the meaning, and the beauty that's been there all along. How this path brought us to that place. How this experience got us through that difficult time. How this set back opened up that opportunity.

Like how I ended up at Valley. I can look back at least a decade and see how the dominos fell—the chain of events that brought me here. And I know that’s very subjective, and maybe I’m just seeing order where there is none. But as a person of faith, that’s my choice, and I find that it’s very helpful. It makes me feel like I’m where I’m supposed to be. It tells me my life is not messy and random, but that there is some kind of direction, some kind of purpose—one that God is always unfolding.

And some might say, *What about individual freedom? What about self-determination? Don’t we have a say in what our purpose is? Don’t we get to decide what kind of life we live?*

All I can say about that is, in my experience it’s complicated. I feel like every decision I’ve made in my life was genuinely my decision, and they all had real consequences, for better or worse. But I also feel like God always finds ways to let me know God’s still there with me, even when I make decisions that steer me away from God and the life God wants for me.

Like when I decided to leave ministry and go into trucking. God didn’t stop me. God went with me. When I was in training in Iowa, and I was afraid I might not pass the CDL exam, and I realized I didn’t have a back-up plan, I felt God’s presence in lots of little ways, and it reassured me. And the same thing when I was out on the road, and I was missing my family, and I was lonelier than I’ve ever been before. I felt God’s presence in lots of little wa

ys, and it comforted me. And every time I had one of those moments, what it did was deepen my relationship with God, and build my trust in God, until I finally decided for myself that I was ready to go back to ministry, and I wanted to give it another try. And that was about the time I saw your ad in the Presbytery newsletter.

So do we have individual freedom? *Yes. No. Maybe. Kind of.* All I can say is, God didn’t force me back into ministry. God loved me back into ministry.

**S**o why am I talking about all this today? What got me thinking about snow art in the first place? What got me thinking about it was Jesus’ baptism. When I read this story last week, I wondered what that moment was like close up, at ground level. If I could hop in a time machine and go back and stand there on the banks of the Jordan and watch Jesus walk down into the river and come up out of the water, what would I actually see? Would I see the sky tear open and a dove come down and land on Jesus? Would I hear a voice from heaven say, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”?

I think most of us think we would. I think most of us assume we’d see *something*—something out of the ordinary. A flash of light. A crackle of thunder. But if we read the story carefully, it’s pretty clear this is a vision meant only for Jesus, and no one else seems to know there’s anything unusual going on. Matthew says the heavens were opened *to Jesus* and that *he* saw the Spirit descending, but he doesn’t say anything

about anyone else, and he doesn't describe anyone reacting to what was going on. There are no gasps from the crowd. The Pharisees and Sadducees don't fall on their knees and start praying. Even John, who knows Jesus is someone special, doesn't seem to bat an eye. The story ends, and Matthew moves on like nothing happened.

But as readers, we know something did happen. Matthew lets us in on it. He gives us a higher view, so to speak. When Jesus came up out of the water, he was anointed by God to announce the kingdom of heaven, even if that wasn't perceivable close up, at ground level. But even as readers, we don't see the whole pattern revealed in this one story. It's only when we look down from way up above, it's only when we read the whole gospel, that everything comes together, and we can see God's purpose unfolding in Jesus' life, from the beginning right up to the very end.

Not that Jesus didn't have individual freedom. Not that he didn't have a say in what his purpose was. Matthew says very clearly that Jesus consented to being baptized. He consented to living the life God intended for him. He consented to his will and God's will being knitted together, as one. That's what his baptism was really about. And that's what ours is about, too.

**I**n a moment we're going to renew our baptismal vows—the promises we made when we were baptized, or that someone made on our behalf and we later confirmed when we were old enough to make a conscious decision. In Presbyterian churches

there are three baptismal vows, but they all boil down to us saying we will live in such a way that our lives are oriented toward God, and not toward anything else; we will live in such a way that our will lines up with God's will, and not the will of anyone else.

At ground level, day by day, what that means is we always choose that which is life-giving over that which brings death; that which builds community over that which creates separation; that which is healing over that which causes suffering; that which is loving and generous over that which is hateful and self-serving. In that way, our baptism is our compass. If we follow it, the way Simon Beck follows his compass, we won't get lost, and our lives, when we look back over many years, won't be messy and random. They'll be works of art revealing God's glory. Amen.