

## Haydenville Congregational Church

The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian

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Matthew 3:13-17

### “Jesus’ Inauguration”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

When Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum left Mount Holyoke College in 2002 and became the ninth President of Spelman College there was great sorrow in South Hadley, Massachusetts and great rejoicing in Atlanta, Georgia. It is tradition that college Presidents are inaugurated with tremendous pomp and circumstance, and Beverly was given a royal welcome at Spelman with an inauguration fit for a queen. Because Beverly and I have been dear friends for many years, she asked me to be a part of her inauguration and I was deeply honored to participate. It was truly the grandest of affairs. An orchestra played as the big auditorium filled with family members, students, professors, colleagues, and friends. Dozens of presidents from other colleges and universities from all over the country processed into the large hall in full academic regalia—it seemed that flowing robes were everywhere in all colors of the rainbow.

During the ceremony, Beverly was referred to often as a strong leader and dignitaries bestowed upon her gifts one might give to a king. A photograph of Beverly taken that day sits on my desk in my study at home—in it Beverly is wearing the large necklace, a gold medallion, they placed around her neck when their pronounced her President and pledged their support of her leadership.

I was thinking about Beverly’s inauguration at Spelman College this week when David Sullivan was sworn in as the new District Attorney. David asked me to offer the Invocation at the two ceremonies, one in Northampton and one in Greenfield, that formally and officially made him the new District Attorney of Hampshire and Franklin counties. Although smaller ceremonies than Beverly’s inauguration, David Sullivan’s swearing-in also included pomp and circumstance, a sense of solemnity, lofty and inspiring language, and references to his strong leadership.

Inaugurations are all about the transfer of power. Witnesses are necessary because their presence affirms: we have chosen you, you are our leader, we recognize your

power and authority and we will honor you. Those gathered at an inauguration have a role—their presence says: we bear witness to this transfer of power, this transition, this moment, this new beginning. You are our leader and in you we trust.

Our reading for today from the Book of Matthew 3 is the story of Jesus' baptism which is, in many ways, Jesus' inauguration. Found in three of the four Gospels (in Matthew, Mark and Luke), Jesus' baptism in the Jordan is a pivotal moment in Jesus' life—it proclaims the beginning of his ministry. Jesus' baptism serves to mark the start of his work in the world—it is his inauguration, his swearing in and as such it is filled with meaning.

The symbolism in Beverly Tatum's inauguration and David Sullivan's swearing in could not be missed. People of authority were present to say: we recognize your power and honor your leadership. The settings were grand and the oaths, speeches, songs and proclamations invoked the presence of God and the weight and importance of this transfer of power. AND those ceremonies contained elements, echoes of similar ceremonies held in ancient times.

In Jesus' time, ceremonies with awe-inspiring pomp and circumstance, pageantry, spectacle and splendor were held when a new emperor was installed in the throne. Those living in the Roman Empire in Jesus' time would have seen or heard about the installations of Julius Caesar and his successor Caesar Augustus—those ceremonies were grandiose, ostentatious, multi-day, extravagant affairs.

Caesar's inauguration involved an imperial procession through the streets of Rome with men on stallions and legions of soldiers marching before Caesar. Caesar was carried on a throne by men who hoisted him high on their shoulders so he could literally look down on his subjects. Caesar wore flowing robes, gold jewels and a crown depicting his royal status. He held a scepter and sat on velvet. The symbolism of Caesar's inauguration was explicit. It was orchestrated to convey the prevailing belief that Caesar was a supreme being—not just an emperor, not just a king, not just a ruler, monarch or general. Caesar was all those things AND something far more significant: Caesar was considered to be divine. Caesar was called the Son of God. The elaborate ritual surrounding his inauguration as Emperor was meant to formally recognize his divine right to rule his kingdom.

This—the accepted divinity of Caesar—is the backdrop, the context, the reality Jesus was born into. To understand Jesus' baptism and subsequent ministry we must appreciate the almost infinite power Caesar held at the time.

When Julius Caesar died, his grandnephew and adopted son Octavian rose to the throne. Octavian took Caesar's name AND he added "Augustus." So he became Caesar Augustus, which was a calculated and intentional move because "Augustus" means "The One Who Is to Be Worshiped."

It was believed that Caesar Augustus, then Octavian, was conceived by the god Apollo in the womb of his mother Atia. Caesar Augustus was referred to as "Savior of the World" and "Lord of the World." Inscriptions carved in marble cornerstones of buildings read: "Divine Augustus Caesar, son of a god, imperator of land and sea, the benefactor and savior of the whole world." Caesar Augustus created Roman coins that depicted him standing above the world as a divine being with his foot on the globe.

Listen to this description of Caesar written during his reign:

*Since the eternal and immortal nature of everything has bestowed upon mankind the greatest good with extraordinary benefactions by bringing Caesar Augustus in our blessed time the father of his own country, divine Rome, and ancestral Zeus, savior of the common race of men, whose providence has not only fulfilled but actually exceeded the prayer of all. For land and sea are at peace and the cities flourish with good order, concord and prosperity.*

Caesar Augustus was not just the Emperor of Rome and not just the Lord of his people, he was considered the Savior of Humanity. His inauguration was choreographed so that it conveyed his majesty, his power, his regal standing, his authority and most importantly his divinity and holiness. And it is during the reign of the mighty Caesar Augustus that Jesus was born.

Jesus, the true savior of humanity, was born. In a stable. Surrounded by animals and dung. To a nobody teenage mother far from home.

And Jesus' inauguration/baptism—the transfer of power from John to Jesus—takes place in a river where Jesus lines up on the muddy banks with throngs of others who have come to experience this ritual symbolizing the repentance of sin and the beginning of life anew.

But Jesus' inauguration/ baptism was also carefully choreographed. Every moment of it was meant to stand in sharp contrast to that of Caesar's.

Jesus' inauguration/ baptism, was meant to offer a glimpse, a foreshadowing of his entire ministry. His baptism was meant to send the message that another king has arrived, another Lord is here, a Messiah who stands in opposition to Caesar. Jesus' baptism was meant to create the tension that would define his entire ministry and lead him to the cross: **the Kingdom of Caesar vs. the Kingdom of God.**

Jesus' inauguration/baptism did not include stallions or thrones, crowns or jewels, armies or swords. It did not include pomp and circumstance, royalty, decrees, spectacle, processions, or pageantry. But it did include the same language as was used for Caesar.

Jesus was a lowly peasant, a poor, thirty-year old wandering Jew from the sticks, the Galilee, far from the center of power in Jerusalem. Jesus carried no weapons, he had no army, he had no power and when he was baptized he had no followers. And yet he sealed his fate and began his journey to the cross on the day of his baptism because when he rose from the water he was inaugurated as the true Son of God. The Gospel of Matthew says that when Jesus rose from river, the Spirit of God descended as a dove and alighted upon him and a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

That passage is often read: "This is my SON, the BELOVED, with whom I am well pleased."

But the true significance of this radical statement is captured when the passage is read: "THIS is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Meaning: THIS, HIM, Jesus—not Caesar—THIS is my true son.

THIS is my son, this Jewish peasant, itinerant teacher, gentle presence, THIS is my son. And Caesar is not.

Jesus' inauguration/baptism should be understood as shocking, threatening, scandalous and dangerous because it began the process of referring to Jesus using the same language that Caesar had claimed. JESUS not Caesar was the true Son of God. Jesus was the true Lord, Jesus was the true Savior of the World, the true Savior of Humanity. Jesus was the fulfillment of the words of the ancient prophet's who foretold his coming. Jesus was the Son of God.

And so the dichotomy began: The Kingdom of Caesar vs. the Kingdom of God.

Caesar talked about peace and celebrated Pax Romana, "the peace of Rome." But his talk was a façade—Caesar's army suppressed insurrections, stole from the poor, plundered villages, and kept order through violence.

Caesar engaged in endless wars to conquer new territories and he oppressed those he conquered. He surrounded himself with generals, exploited his subjects, and lived a lavish and hedonistic life...all the while calling himself the Son of God, Divine Ruler, Savior of Humanity.  
That was the Kingdom of Caesar.

As opposed to the Kingdom of God.

Jesus talked about peace and reached out to the poor, blessed the meek, and healed the sick. He did not allow his followers to carry weapons of any kind—not even a walking staff that could be used for self-defense against robbers they might encounter on the road. Jesus was nonviolent. He was homeless and penniless. He called fishermen as his followers and dined with sinners, outcasts, and tax collectors. He traveled from village to village relying on the hospitality of others, and preached to those who gathered around him. He moved among common people and said that those who heard his words were his family. He spoke about the Kingdom of God as a here and now reality based in acts of generosity and kindness, compassion and love, justice and peace.

Both Caesar and Jesus were powerful. Very powerful. But their power was of two totally different kinds. Caesar's power lay in force and might with violence always lurking, and obedience always necessary. Caesar's was power OVER.

Jesus' power lay in his being, his teaching, his healing and his heart. Jesus' power was power WITH. He did not have any of the visible symbols of power, in fact he appeared powerless. But his power lay in his vision of a world based on equity, a world where fairness was honored and wealth was shared. His power lay in his repudiation of violence and his embracing true peace. His power lay in his inspiring words, his tender actions, his compelling vision, his sense of hope, his belief in change, his expressions of love, his commitment to inclusion, and his deep humanity. Jesus, the divine Son of God was approachable, accessible and, amazingly, deeply human.

Caesar had all the trappings of power. He was surrounded by wealth, weapons and subjects. He was inaugurated to be an Emperor.

Jesus had none of the trappings of power. He was surrounded by poor people, lepers, children, and women. He was inaugurated to be a servant.

It was the Kingdom of Caesar vs. the Kingdom of God.

And the Kingdom of Caesar should have won. They put Jesus to death and his followers scattered.

And yet, 2000 years later, we study Caesar and worship Jesus.  
2000 years later we ignore September 23<sup>rd</sup> the birthday of Augustus and celebrate  
December 25<sup>th</sup>, the birthday of Jesus.  
2000 years later we reflect on the reign of Caesar and model our lives after Jesus.

Jesus' inauguration in a muddy river with common people waiting their turn to be dunked in the water was the beginning of a ministry that revealed self-less love, demonstrated compassion, shared a holy vision, and redefined power.

Tender-hearted, gentle, defenseless Jesus redefined power.

Today we who are Jesus' heirs still live in a world of Caesars.

And so we, Jesus' heirs, must continue his legacy...with our words, our actions, our beliefs, and our prayers we must continue to redefine power—as Jesus' family and followers we are called to condemn violence, to embrace peace and to create the Kingdom of God on earth in his name.

Amen.

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