

HOUSEHOLD(S) OF FAITH
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Baptism of our Lord
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Thus says the LORD. Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. (Isaiah 43:1-7)

Now when Jesus had been baptized and was praying, the heaven opened, the Holy Spirit descended upon him in like a dove, and a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:15-17, 21-22)

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Over the holidays, Paula and I took a little trip. Actually, it was a very long trip. We visited a galaxy far, far away. That's right! We saw *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*.

It was set in a galaxy so far away and the characters, escapades and aerial battles so far fetched we could, for awhile, forget the problems of our own galaxy, which is to say, our nation and the world. In that far, far away galaxy there were no characters named The Donald, Hillary, Obama or Kardashian.

Movies can be an escape from reality. We all need a breather from too much reality in the news and in our face. *Star Wars* was a lot of mindless fun. The bar scene in particular was priceless—so many diverse, whacky and bizarre creatures mixing and mingling in a kind of beloved community.

I would have left the theatre with nothing but good feelings had it not been for the bombardment of previews. Six previews spewed fear and violence each graphically portraying some horrific attack upon our nation or the planet by evil aliens. The "other" out there was out to destroy us and our civilization, unless we could fight back with more potent weapons than they had.

In none of the previews were there any hints of non-violent solutions to conflict. No *Sesame Street* moments with Muppets. I know, I know, it's the movies. So who cares? Well, for starters, I do. Entertainment is not neutral. Whiz-bang movies leave impressions that churches, schools and parents can hardly match.

The previews were a kind of religious education, a catechism of sorts, in dualism. Namely, the other is dangerous. We are always good. The other is always evil. And the only thing that will save and redeem us is violence.

Impressionable boys and girls sat terrified by sinister aliens and mesmerized by awesome weapons. Adults might dismiss it as silly; I doubt if many children can. Someday those children will have their fingers on triggers and buttons.

Be afraid boys and girls. Be very afraid. The alien and foreign is coming to get us. Only the names and faces of "the other" change from one generation to the next.

I left the theater saying to myself, Jesus, we have a lot of remedial work to do. I know we can't quarantine ourselves. We're not Amish. We go to movies, watch the super bowl, soak up commercials and buy Budweiser, cars and guns.

We are not Amish. We live in the world, but we mustn't be conformed to the world, not that kind of world. We must be transformed by the constant renewing of our minds and hearts in the faith of Jesus. Not faith *in* Jesus. The faith *of* Jesus.

If this household of faith doesn't nurture and cultivate hearts and minds of mercy and compassion, who will?

The world promotes dualism, us against them, good against evil with few shades of gray in between. Our own nation's self-righteousness and trust in violence often mimics the pathological dualism of ISIS. They are righteous. All others are infidels and wicked.

Our Christian faith teaches us differently. Violence breeds violence. Only love can end hatred. Only forgiveness can end the endless cycles of revenge and retaliation. We trust an ancient, prophetic vision of universal kinship.

All are one. All are beloved children of God.

The baptism of Jesus seems like a singular, historic event. But it's actually a revelation from within our tradition that all people are beloved children of the Holy One. We are beloved. We are not conceived in original sin. We are conceived with an original blessing.

We are beloved. That's the beginning and heart of our identity. But it's not the end. The Beloved loves and serves others with compassion.

We are a household of faith. But not just any faith. We trust in love as the way, the truth and the life, the kind of love embodied in and practiced by Jesus of Nazareth.

Our time together each Sunday is a way to nurture and cultivate a certain disposition toward ourselves and the world. *God so loved the world that God gave.* And we too must love the world, all of it, not just our own part, not in the abstract but in the nitty-gritty of life, right down to the very soil under our feet.

That kind of love takes practice. And it takes more than an hour on Sunday morning to cultivate. Each of us comes here from our own household of faith. And it is there that we must somehow cultivate the practices of compassion more intentionally and consistently. Some of you already do. I hope all of us will.

And so I have made a resolution. This year, with the help of Ethel and the Ruling Elders, I'd like to provide each household with guidelines for such practices. As a household of faith and as households of faith we can and must work together on cultivating the habits of compassion.

With or without official baptism, we are all called the beloved and given a vocation to love kindness, do justice and walk humbly with each other as though we were all one family. And that, in fact, is what we are.