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Spiritual Inauguration

Mark 1:10

There are turning points in human history which signal the onset of a new era. One of these turning points took place with the election of Andrew Jackson as President of the United States in 1828. Jackson's election happened because of a huge expansion in the number of eligible voters. For the first time virtually all free white males were permitted to vote. In that year voter participation grew from 27% to 58%. Jackson was elected over the incumbent John Quincy Adams because he was considered the candidate of the common people.

The significance of Jackson's election was illustrated by what happened at his inauguration. Margaret Bayard Smith was a veteran chronicler of Washington life at that time and no fan of Jackson. But she could not help but be impressed by the huge crowd of people who turned out for the event. She wrote:

Thousands and thousands of people, without distinction of rank, collected in an immense mass round the Capitol...silent, orderly, and tranquil, with their eyes fixed on the front of that edifice, waiting for the appearance of the President in the portico. When the President emerged and bowed to the people the shout that rent the air still resounds in my ears (quoted by Jon Meacham, *American Lion*, pages 58-59).

Margaret Bayard Smith went on to describe Jackson's speech which he closed with a prayer. After bowing to the people once again he took the oath and kissed the Bible. Then he mounted his white horse to ride down Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House. She then observed something no one expected to happen. The people joined the parade behind their leader. Again in Mrs. Smith's words,

Country men, farmers, gentlemen, mounted and dismounted, boys, women and children, black and white...carriages, wagons and carts all pursuing him to the President's house (*American Lion*, page 61).

The way that Jackson bowed to the crowd made it clear that he understood that he was elected not to serve himself, but to serve the people. The crowd responded in a way that demonstrated that they understood this was not just the President's moment. It was also their moment. They joined the parade because they knew that this inauguration had transformed them, too.

We see a similar process unfolding in the first chapter of the gospel of Mark. There Jesus' baptism by John is presented as an inauguration. It signals the beginning of Jesus' ministry and the opening of a new spiritual era. Mark tells us that when Jesus came up out of the water "he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him (Mark 1:10)."

Then Jesus hears a voice which expresses the significance of that moment. These words are borrowed from two specific Old Testament passages. Psalm 2 was used in the coronation of Israel's kings. Isaiah 42 describes the Servant of the Lord. This is a moment when the nature of Jesus' ministry is stated with great clarity. He is to be a leader who serves God and pours out his life for others. There

will be in him no arrogant display of power. His crown will be made of thorns and his throne will be a cross of execution. He inaugurates a new era which is based not on power but on love.

Jesus' ministry invited his followers to enter this new era. In the 9th chapter of Acts Paul makes a visit to new believers in the city of Ephesus. He asks some questions about their participation in the new era that Jesus has initiated. He learns that they are not yet practicing Jesus' way of love and service. They haven't yet discovered that there is a place for them in the parade. When he lays hands on them the Spirit comes into their lives to transform their perspective. Then they realize that are part of Jesus' ministry.

In the life of the early church the observance of Jesus' baptism was seen as the ideal time to welcome new members. They saw it as a day to celebrate who we are by virtue of our baptism. They believed that Jesus' inauguration was not just his moment. It is our moment, too. We are all changed by what Jesus has done. We all have a place in his parade.