

Baptism and Our Calling

Mark 1:4-11

January 10, 2021

Being a Christian in the world is surely hard enough, but when we drift away from God and lose our sense of calling it becomes almost impossible. In Barbara Brown Taylor's book, **The Preaching Life**, she quotes a man who struggles with his calling in the world. His dilemma is the sharp shift from Sunday worship back into the world. ***When it's over, I get in my car to drive home feeling so full of love its unbelievable, but by the time I've gone twenty minutes down the road it has already begun to wear off. By Monday morning it's all gone.***

This is a struggle many of us face. But today the struggle is even harder, because, as Barbara reminds us, it is the church and not the world that is strange. The gap between the two has only widened over the past few decades. What we need for this struggle is a genuine sense of our calling. Where are we to get this?

John the Baptist appears out of nowhere dressed like an Old Testament prophet. People flock to him because they are hungry for a word from God. He causes great excitement. The eerie silence that has settled over Israel, with no word from God since the prophet Malachi, is finally broken by the voice of one crying in the wilderness. The last verse in the Jewish bible is Malachi 4:5. It says, ***Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.*** And here he is; no wonder they thought this was Elijah! His message is simple. Here's how the Message translates it:

The real action comes next: The star in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will change your life. I'm baptizing you here in this river ... His baptism-a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit-will change you from the inside out.

Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins John cried. Now there's two profoundly theological words we quickly pass over without much thought, don't we? What does **repentance** mean? And what is the meaning of **baptism**? Keep those questions open for now.

Baptism is important. It reminds us that we are accepted and loved by God. Infant baptism is often criticized for being little more than a social rite of passage. But, in fact, it is a powerful reminder of the fact that we bring nothing to the font that makes us worthy before God. We are helpless babies brought by loving parents who promise to raise us within the faith community. Infant baptism, in spite of the dangers of abuse, is an eloquent symbol of God's grace.

On my own baptism I have proof that I was baptized. I have a card here that tells me that a Rev J. Spence Cuthill baptized me on April 15, 1942 at the Old Church of Arbroath. Admittedly this was the social custom in the pre-60's world of Christendom. Baptism, or as many preferred to call it then, **Christening**, was socially expected, whether or not we took the promises seriously. It's really important to remember that event in our lives. In my case I was baptized twice. First as a baby and second as an adult believer by immersion in a tank of water. It happened in a Toronto church (as my own church didn't have a tank) where I stared down at a pool of water and entered it. The minister waited for me, and took me under the water to the words, "in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost."

Paul describes baptism in our reading from Romans with these words: ***Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.*** For many biblical and theological reasons I happen to believe that adult baptism by immersion best captures the meaning visually and spiritually what Paul describes here and elsewhere.

As I reflected on my baptism and calling in Christ, I remembered a film I had seen several years ago called **The Apostle**. Robert Duval plays Sonny, a fiery Pentecostal southern preacher in Texas. But Sonny, like many of us is full of contradictions. He is a man of great faith whose life seems to bubble over with God's Spirit. But he is also a man who has fallen from grace many times. His wife has had enough of him and has found love in another. Sonny is deeply hurt by this separation and seeing his wife with another man drives him over

the edge. The next day Sonny arrives at the baseball diamond where his kids are playing and attempts to drag his family away. When he is resisted, he lashes out with a baseball bat and accidentally kills the man his wife now loves. Sonny is forced to run for cover, and find refuge deep in the Louisiana countryside.

Safe in his new community Sonny goes early in the morning to the river. He enters the river and prays to God to forgive him. He is repentant and wishes to be baptized again. He asks God if it is acceptable that he baptize himself as there is no one there to baptize him. This will be for Sonny a fresh start, a new beginning, a calling to serve God once again. And this he does in a marvelous way. A church is gathered, folk are converted and joy is present in their midst.

Sonny's heart was in the right place, but perhaps his theology of baptism wrong. What is powerful about this scene is Sonny's acknowledgement that baptism symbolizes his repentance, faith and calling to serve God anew in the world. It is a sign for him that reaffirms his calling to be God's servant. He wants to serve God again in spite of his sin.

Repentance for John the Baptist and for Sonny means a change of mind, a turning around and seeing one's sins as a heavy load requiring forgiveness. The people who flocked to John and were baptized confessing their sins were asked to reform their lives. Baptism was a sign of that change of heart and life. It was a washing clean the outside of the body pointing to its inner cleansing.

This is what I remember feeling as I entered the waters of baptism. It felt like I was publicly confessing that my life had been radically changed. I had chosen to follow the way of Christ and live out my calling, first, by being part of the new family of faith in a congregation, and second, by living out this repentance and forgiveness in all of my life's choices. Those of us baptized as infants don't, of course, have this experience. But there will have been a time in your life, perhaps at what we call "confirmation", or later in life, when the promise our parents made at our baptism is ratified by us personally. Our baptism marked us forever belonging to Christ.

Jesus comes to John and also asks to be baptized. His baptism is a critical moment in his life as he identifies himself with Israel and its sins. It also is a moment when Jesus will receive confirmation of his calling in the world. For as he emerged from the waters of the Jordan the sky split open and the Spirit fell on him and a voice from heaven assured him that he was indeed God's Son.

Baptism is also a wild experience for Jesus. In dramatic language Mark says in effect that as Jesus came out of the water, ***he saw the heavens in the process of being ripped apart***. God reaches down and pulls the curtain of space/time apart signifying an opening up of what had been closed. Mark doesn't use the common word for "open" here. It is a word used only here and in Mark 15:38 where the curtain of the temple is torn in two, from top to bottom. Mark uses a powerful, almost violent word to describe this vision of heaven being opened up. When Jesus dies the curtain that for generations had separated the worshippers from the inner holy sanctum is suddenly torn in two. The inner holy place, symbol of God's presence, is now open to all.

All Jesus' followers will be baptized by the same Spirit. Just as Jesus' identity is established by the voice from heaven, so in our baptism our identity is established in our joining in Christ's life, death and resurrection. Through repentance, faith and baptism we enter into a new calling; we are now God's people in the world. Just as the Spirit drives Christ into the wilderness so too the Spirit drives us into the world to witness to the truth.

Perhaps you are one of those Christians this morning that has lost any sense of God's calling for you. Perhaps the idea of calling frightens you. We might see it as being asked to do more, or be more spiritual, more loving, more religious, or whatever. Or we might think that this calling is strictly for clergy. Luther clarified this difference by saying that in their baptism both clergy and laity are ordained to ministry. True we have different offices. My office as clergy is to be responsible to minister the word and sacraments. The laity are to fulfil their calling through their work whatever that be: teacher, bus driver, accountant, mother at home, and so on. Our offices in life are different, but our vocation or calling to ministry symbolized in baptism is the same. Our baptisms, as Barbara Brown Taylor reminded me,

are our ordinations when we were set apart as God's people to share Christ's ministry, whether or not we ever wear clerical collars. We Protestants perhaps muddied this distinction by our emphasis on clergy alone as those who are truly called to ministry.

Our calling to be God's people in the world doesn't mean standing on a soap box outside Jackson Square, or witnessing door to door. It may mean simply being who you are and doing what you do. But who we are and what we do is based on God's calling to be priests (representing God to the people and representing the people to God).

Remember your baptism. Why? Christians are people baptized in the Spirit and called to ministry in the world. Monday morning is far removed from Sunday worship. Now at our office, factory, and school room, home, wherever we are, even there we are God's people, the Spirit-baptized ones.

Amen