

Cultivating God-Consciousness

Mark 1:9-15

Lent is typically the time of year when Baptists get itchy for *agua*. In most mainline American Baptist Churches, we schedule the customary baptism classes for youth, hoping to persuade them to take a leap of faith into a hidden tank of lukewarm water, or an icy cold river, as the case may be. This is based historically on the typical age for a Jewish bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah; Baptists believe it's time for the children to suck it up and take ownership of their faith.

Except, most 12-year-olds are not ready to muster the type of faith that will last a lifetime. I was baptized by my father when I was this age, which was still, for me, an age of innocence (that was even before I grew a beard!). By the time I was fifteen, I had pretty much wiped out any redemptive benefits associated with my baptism. It was a few years later when I returned to a meaningful belief in the power and presence of God in my life. And it was even a little longer before I personally sensed the real meaning of baptism and owned it enough to be re-baptized.

The location where I parted the waters was in Israel, in Yardenit, where most Christian pilgrims come to the River Jordan, just past the southern outlet of the Sea of Galilee—a long way from where tradition tells us Jesus took up John's baptistic ministry, which was closer to the Dead Sea. The main reason Yardenit is popular is because the Jordan flows more fully there (where serious Baptists like me can be fully dunked), as by the time it meanders down to the traditional location near the Dead Sea, the river is a barely a rippling brook—hardly enough to even christen an infant.

My father once again had the duty of baptizing me, much as he did when I was younger, less than even half the age of my second immersion.

What made it most meaningful to me had little to do with the reason we typically baptize. I wasn't really seeking to be forgiven by God, or to express my faith, or to join a church; at the time this baptism occurred, it was more of an affirmation of my call to ministry. It was a baptism of commissioning—a baptism with a cause. It was more about what I was yet to do with my life. For me, it was a very profound and meaningful moment, as I imagined Jesus doing the same thing when John baptized him in this very same river.

Now, admittedly, the heavens didn't break open for me and the only dove-like anointing that might have occurred would have been some unpleasant residue dropped on me from overhead. But that was fine. Being a young pastor at the time, I was ambitious and naïve enough to believe that in rising out of the Jordan's waters, this was existentially significant for me. I was acutely conscious of God's presence in my life. I felt I was being commissioned by God to serve in a special way to help change the world. It was a heady moment. I was determined to be not only the best pastor I could be, but an even better reflection of Jesus—completely and astoundingly devoted to serving God in the ways I would. I was seeking and responding to what I believed was my calling in life.

I reflect on that day nostalgically because, by and large, those were youthful dreams. When one is just starting out in a career, ambitions run high and life seems like an empty canvas laid out before you upon which you will paint your colors and, hopefully, your masterpiece. I suppose, many people have heady moments when they receive a degree, for example, or land their first real job, or when they get married or have children; they are hopeful they are going to be the exception and do things exactly right as they should to leave their God-given mark upon the world! Some achieve

remarkable things, while most of us wonder how we'll live up to our own expectations, let alone those of others. Still, milestones are like baptisms of a sort; the ceremony might differ, but the feelings are often the same: What am I to do with my life? What is my vocation? How is God leading me? Will I be the person I feel called to be?

The word, vocation, comes from the Latin, *vocatus* or *vocare*, which means, "to call" or "to summon." Historically, it's been closely tied to religious careers, but in recent centuries it has been linked to any profession or activity people feel led to pursue. It's a way to derive meaning and a sense of fulfillment and purpose in what one might do in life. It's not an insignificant matter for any of us. People will invest more of themselves with passion and commitment if they believe what they're doing truly matters and they're being called to do it.

Finding your calling is a lot like sensing your place and destiny. There is a higher, more noble, feel to it, which is why it is often associated with a consciousness of God's place and influence upon a person's life. People of faith often discern a calling, because they feel guided by the hand of God. Many of the proverbial "dots" start connecting; you discover "holy coincidences," meaningful contacts and relationships, and definite patterns taking shape in your thinking, as you more intentionally tie together experiences with a sense of self within a cause and purpose greater than you might otherwise have.

Vocation is not limited to people of faith, by any means. All sorts of people sense a calling where their work serves a greater good than just their private interests or needs. For instance, if you work in a lab at Pfizer, you may be motivated to work hard because you're helping to find cures for conditions and drugs for diseases that afflict the human population. That's

a significant calling. Educators hope to help young people find excitement in learning, opening up the world to them. Even if you feel as if you're merely a cog in corporate machinery, where you work to help the company succeed, it's possible to sense a noble purpose behind your labor. A sense of vocation matters, even if it's not tied to one's job or income. As Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "It is not more vacation that we need—it is more vocation."

Relevant to our text today, it goes without saying that when Jesus was baptized by John, the sense of calling was at the heart of the story. Jesus clearly sensed his vocation—his calling—which would have been a natural and compelling desire at this point in his life, especially since as firstborn son, he likely would have been restricted to the customary role of taking care of his family. Instead, he was following a different path. Though we may assume Jesus's sense of vocation was virtually pre-programmed (hard-wired with a sense of being the Son of God—of being the Beloved One), in all likelihood, that is piety getting ahead of reality.

I take the story of his baptism by John as an important milestone in Jesus's life, when clarity came for what he was to do. The Gospel stories convey it with images of the heavens opening and the Spirit of God, portrayed as a dove, descending and anointing him, followed by the voice of God speaking in confirmation of who he was. All of this is quite lovely, but we should take it as nothing more than symbolism. Despite Matthew's suggestion otherwise, all of this would have been private pondering for Jesus; he was discerning within himself what his role would be, what he was to do, and even that he was beloved—he was a son of God who, like David and others, would represent and fulfill the divine aspirations in that time.

What might those aspirations have been? Since all of this is rooted in John's ministry and baptism, it's a good place to start. John's call to repentance was not akin to our traditional notion of altar calls and religious conversions. Sure, it was about cultivating a sense of God's presence and will, but more for the nation of Israel and the way each person contributed to Israel's redemption. Today, we would describe it as a call to social justice and repentance from contributing to the injustices of the wider world, either through acts of commission or omission. I doubt that, at the time, John or Jesus were viewing their roles or purpose as anything like what Christian tradition eventually presented them to be. Luke may have made this clearer than the others by explicitly referencing what John wanted people to do in response to their baptism:

“Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise. Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

(Luke 3:11-14)

John was proclaiming an ethical turnabout: instead of merely living out the daily grind and letting the world go on as it always had, especially when people were struggling to survive under the burden of an unjust system of political favoritism and Roman imperial rule. His call was to stop cooperating with an unjust system and unethical conduct and the pursuit of riches; turn things around and rebuild Israel as the society it was meant to be! Instead of focusing only on your private interests, live beyond yourself; be generous to others, be honest before others, challenge unjust or corrupt authority, be fair, magnanimous, and merciful for the sake of others. Treat your neighbor right; help to fix what is wrong in society. Yes, there is always an element of personal repentance in *metanoia* moments (we all fall

short), but that's not the endgame. Faith is not for one's own self-preservation, but for the greater good.

John's message must have deeply impacted Jesus and awakened a calling within him—enough that he chose, initially, to be a follower of John and eventually took up the proclamation when John was arrested. Even if Jesus hadn't personally participated in acts of oppression, he was part of a society that did, which is why he needed to share in this baptism of repentance. The baptism was, in effect, collective—for all his people's sins. Out of the waters came his sense of calling to do his part to deliver Israel from these sins as a beloved child of God.

In time, the early Christian church would replace this understanding of Jesus' calling and religiously place the emphasis on Jesus himself—putting capital letters on “son of God” and “beloved.” They would glorify him as the only begotten Son of God and uniquely beloved. That was understandable, given his unique role and their experience with him. But if we were to wind back the clock and join Jesus on this journey, we'd be mistaken to conclude that Jesus's sense of calling was intended to be unique and limited to his messianic role. No, he was merely the harbinger and example of what we are all called to do in our own stations in life.

The sense of being anointed as a Beloved One was based on Jesus's confidence of being at the center of God's will—of taking on and fulfilling God's objectives—of creating a new humanity by inspiring people to be in right relation with each other, by being truly just and merciful, compassionate and loving. Jesus was only initiating this process, not fulfilling it, as some in the Pauline tradition later mistakenly conveyed. His God-consciousness was linked to his vocation—to be a model for us to follow—not one for the world to place upon a pedestal and simply adore

throughout the ages. Jesus cultivated his God-consciousness every day, on a personal, private level, but not uniquely, for that would have limited the mission of God solely to one person. Hence, Jesus formed a dedicated community of other beloved ones whom he called into their new vocation—disciples who would be impassioned and committed to put into practice the kinds of right relationships that had always been envisioned, even from the earliest times. Ultimately, Jesus’s vocation was to empower people to the highest calling of all: to save the world from itself.

For this reason, I firmly believe that if any of us are drawn to the prophetic spirit of John and Jesus, we will share the same vision and concern for what goes on in this world; our calling is no different than what Jesus himself sensed. We cultivate God-consciousness in settings where it doesn’t exist. We raise the standards of how people are valued and treated. That isn’t an evangelistic mission to turn people into religious believers; it is a calling to bear witness to the divine vision of a world redeemed from its worst excesses and injustices and to the values God inspires. In doing so, we then are beloved ones who join with others who share the same vision in each generation.

This is what I believe. I liken my second baptism in the Jordan River as a symbol of my own commitment to this ministry and vision for how to live my life. I wouldn’t have understood this when I was twelve, or what I would be getting myself into. However, by the time I was a young adult, I could. So I had the delight and privilege to claim my part in that calling in the very same waters where Jesus embraced his own sense of destiny so long ago. I will hold onto that memory, not because it makes me special or privileged, but because it reminds me of how close Jesus continues to be with any of us who embrace his redemptive vocation. All of us together are

beloved ones. That is the baptism we share. And the same voice who spoke to his heart will confirm our place in God's realm: "You are my children, all my beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

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18 February 2018