

Jesus' Baptism and Ours

Sermon: Sunday, January 7, 2018/ The First Sunday After the Epiphany

St. Peter's Cathedral, Helena, Montana

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Good Morning!

Today, we celebrate the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan. John the Baptist, John the forerunner, prepared the world for Jesus. John baptized with water for repentance and then pointed to Jesus as the one mightier than he. Jesus would give his disciples far more than repentance. He would give them the gift of His Spirit to guide them, empower them and equip them to live the life God intended for them.

Jesus' baptism gave him a vocation, a calling from God. His calling was to be the unique, beloved Son of God. He would give the world a unique mission of preaching, teaching and healing. Then, after three years of ministry in the area around the Sea of Galilee, Jesus would make his way south to Jerusalem where he would suffer at the hands of both the religious and political authorities of his day, be crucified and three days later be raised victorious over sin and death.

Jesus was baptized with a mission and a vocation. Those of us who would be his disciples would also be given a vocation. In this sermon, I want to focus on Jesus' vocation and ours. I am sure it goes without saying to a community like this one, that all baptized Christians are ministers. All baptized Christians have a vocation. Vocation is not something that only the clergy have. It is a gift God gives to everyone. The clergy are to model vocation, not monopolize it.

Jesus' vocation was to trust in His Father's direction and to follow it. His calling was to be in intimate communication with his father, to hear him and to discern His will with loving obedience.

There would be many occasions when Jesus would be tempted to renounce his vocation, but he never did. The first time Jesus would be tempted to renounce his vocation would be immediately after his baptism. Immediately after Jesus'

baptism, Mark tells us that “the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan.” Jesus is driven into the wilderness to be tested as to whether he will be true to his vocation. The whole tactic of the devil is to destroy Jesus’ vocation, to convince him that it is not worth the effort of following his Father, who had just declared Jesus his beloved Son at his baptism.

There is much we can learn from our Lord about our own calling and what it means to pursue our own vocation. Vocation has to do with the gifts we have been given and then using them. It is entirely possible that we are using the gifts God has given us all the time, we just may not be instructed in some of the basic principles of identifying our vocation.

Over the years, I have found it helpful to ask ourselves four questions.

First, what do I enjoy doing?

Second, what kinds of things do I do well?

Third, what do others confirm that I enjoy doing and do well?

Fourth, what needs do I see?

I will take these four questions and expand on them.

First, what do I enjoy doing? Stop and think about that for a moment. A godly vocation brings joy. Vocation is not some endless burden that depresses us. Vocation brings joy. It is important that every baptized Christian know what it is that gives her or him joy.

Second, what kinds of things do I do well? We tend to take for granted what we do well and make the mistake of assuming that everyone can do what comes easily to us. It has been my consistent experience that vocation can reveal itself early in life. I have known many people who tended to play at what they were good at. My father, who was a brilliant man, became a professor of Physical Chemistry, which is a lot of math. He would tell me that when he was a boy, math to him, was just a game. Vocation and the gifts for it can be revealed very early.

Third, what do others confirm in me that I do well? This is a very interesting and important question to consider. Gifts are not just what we think we have, but

what others confirm that we have. I knew a woman in my parish who would often say, 'I do not know what my ministry is.' Whenever she said this, those of us around her would be astounded. We were astounded because it was perfectly obvious that she had enormous gifts of kindness and compassion that she used all the time and to many others' benefit. She was on the altar guild, the vestry and was the parish secretary of a local Lutheran church for more than 30 years! She either was unaware of her gifts or took them so for granted that she did not see them. But she used them to the upbuilding of countless others.

Fourth, what needs do I see? All of us see different needs based on our having different gifts. Vocation and ministry are intended to meet needs. They are not for our own egos. The use of our gifts is to benefit human need. A famous lay theologian named Frederick Buechner once wrote that,

"the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Sometimes we see a situation in the world which causes us great stress or anger. That can be a call to ministry. God may be calling us to minister in an area where we see a great need. I remember a woman who came to me in mid-life struggling with going back to school. Going back to school would mean major sacrifices for her family in terms of sharing responsibilities and financial stress. But she did it, soon becoming a major leader in one of the largest and most crucial emergency rooms in the city. She dealt with the severest crises with calm, organization and kindness. Her new vocation was a big surprise and gave her a new life.

Which brings me to another aspect of vocation; namely, surprise. Our God is a God of surprise. Often God surprises us in our quest for vocation. Often God surprises us with joy.

I finish with a brief personal reflection on my call here to St. Peter's Cathedral as your interim Dean. My call here had several of the ingredients that I have been talking about. It was a great surprise.

You know Paul Bresnahan, who was here 'interim dean' before me. Paul and Cindy have been close friends for years. When Sherry and I found out that he was ill, we came and visited him and Cindy on our way east in September. When we

found out he had another health issue, we were talking to him over the phone almost daily. After his doctor told him that he would need to step down, Sherry and I were talking about this in our home in Portland, Oregon. I thought about the possibility of taking his place and asked Paul what he thought about that. He liked the possibility and then asked Bishop Brookhart. We had first met Bishop Brookhart and Susan on a course at St. George's College in Jerusalem, so we had a previous relationship with them. The Bishop affirmed our inquiry and things moved very quickly from there.

In terms of some of these principles of identifying a call here, there was the opportunity to meet a need, there was a surprise and there was a fresh opportunity to do a short-term ministry that could be beneficial to everyone. Biblically, call is about giving to others out of the gifts you have first received, while others benefit from those gifts as well.

Vocation is something long term. God is consistent and will keep pursuing us if we do not hear him the first time or even the second or the tenth. Vocation is not just about one's work. It is about all of life: our relationships, our marriages, our commitments, our families and our church. More important than the work we do is the love and integrity with which we do it.

This morning as we celebrate the baptism of Jesus and the beginning of his three year ministry, may we give thanks for his vocation. May we also give thanks for our own vocations as well and pray that we may be faithful to each of our callings in our own generation. Amen

The Very Rev. Graham Smith