

BAPTISM AND VOCATION

SERMON FOR BAPTISM OF OUR LORD  
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First Presbyterian Church of Marianna

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MARK 1:4-11

Baptism is older than Christianity. The Jews baptized, by immersion, in water, converts to Judaism; proselyte Jews as they were known. And ritually cleansing, ritual baths, are a part of the Orthodox Jewish tradition to this day. Faye Kellerman, one of my favorite mystery writers, wrote a book entitled "Ritual Baths" a few years ago that in the context of a modern murder mystery describes the customs well.

Thus, John the Baptist's ministry predates Christianity, predates Christ. John was truly the voice crying in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord, foretold by the prophet Isaiah.

His baptism was for the repentance of sins. It was a ritual cleansing, a renewal of faith, a time of putting past sins behind and starting over.

Not so when he baptized Jesus. In the other gospels, John the Baptist protests that he is not worthy to be baptizing Jesus, that Jesus should be baptizing him. For Jesus is without sin. Jesus has lived that perfect life that left Him with no sins to repent, no need to renew faith, no need to start over.

Instead, for Jesus, His baptism is almost tantamount to what ordination is to us today: it is the beginning of His ministry.

In a very real sense, our baptism, our engrafting in to the body of Christ, is the same for us as it was for Jesus: the beginning of our ministry, the beginning of our work for the kingdom of God.

We who are part of the Reformed Tradition believe in the priesthood of all believers. We believe that everyone who believes in Jesus Christ is involved in the ministry of Jesus Christ. Indeed, if the church is the body of Christ in the world, and we are individually members of the church and of Christ's body, we are all called to do the work of Jesus Christ. Our baptism, whether in infancy or as an adult, or in between, is a sign and a seal of this calling.

Our vocation, our calling, may be to the ordered ministry of the church. We may be called to serve as ruling elders in our local congregation, or we may even be called to serve as teaching elders, as ministers of the Word and Sacrament.

Each one of us who has been baptized is also called to a ministry. It may be a ministry of compassion, feeding the hungry, comforting the sorrowing, tending to the sick. It may be a ministry of administration, keeping the books, counting the money. It may be a ministry of teaching, in Sunday School, WWW, Vacation Bible School. It may be a ministry of prayer, praying for the sick and suffering, praying in support of your pastor and church leaders.

Some of us see our calling clearly, and respond to that call gladly, and find fulfillment, joy, even success, in what God has called us to do.

Others struggle. Others have difficulty finding their niche, their place, the work that is satisfying, pleasing to God. I don't know why. God does. Some of us may need more seasoning, more training, more experience. And some of us may not be paying attention to what God is trying to call us to do.

It is like the farm boy who showed up at seminary a hundred years ago. He said he'd been plowing a field in the Spring, and when he stopped from that back-breaking work, and looked up in the sky, he saw two letters written in the clouds, and P and a C. He pondered them, and then decided that they meant, "Preach Christ." And so he left his plow and came to seminary.

After a year in seminary, during which he failed every class he took, the dean of the school called him in to his office, and said, "Son, I think you misunderstood what the Lord was trying to tell you. You are not called to Preach Christ. Go home and Plant Corn."

In a couple of weeks, we will ordain and install elders whom God has called to serve in special ways. We do not yet know all the ways in which God will lead them. We do not yet know all the ways in which God will lead us. But we do know that from our baptism, we have been serving God, and throughout our lives, we will serve God in yet more new, exciting, challenging ways.

And God's call, our vocation, changes.

When I began in ministry, over forty years ago, there were some things I thought I wanted to be and do. I thought I wanted to be a camp director, running a place like Dogwood Acres, and so I set out to prepare myself to do that, going to workshops and training events in Youth Ministry and Recreation. And that calling has been fulfilled as I have volunteered to lead camps and conferences throughout my ministry.

There was a time, as I neared and passed retirement, when I thought God was calling me to be a chaplain, either for hospice or for a retirement community. And I applied and interviewed for two or three of those positions. And obviously, I didn't get them. That wasn't what God was calling me to do.

SO...here I am. Obviously, God was calling me to be an interim pastor. And you know, I interviewed for one position and had another one waiting to interview me when I was called to be your interim pastor. But then, in the midst of my interim ministry here, God called me to something else, to the Coordinating Presbyter position of the Presbytery of Florida. I used to think that I wanted to be a presbytery executive, and I applied for several positions, interviewed for a few, turned down a couple and was turned down by more. One of the things I have learned is that if you are going to seek God's call for your live, you had better learn how to accept rejection. I've been turned down for more pulpits and positions than I've turned down, and I've turned down more than a few.

We have to keep trying to find what God wants us to do next. I am always looking for the next place that God will call me to serve, the next call that God has in store for me, and someday, I know that God will call me home to my heavenly home, and I suspect God will have something for me to do there, too.

From our baptism until our final call to the kingdom of heaven, God is calling us to do the things God wants us to be doing and to be the people God created us to be.

Let us pray.