

Pastor Gail Duba
January 10, 2021

Baptism--God's Common Call to Ministry

Mark 1:4-11
Epiphany 1B

Once upon a time long ago a young man made it his goal to become a saint. He left his home, family, and possessions and journeyed into the hot sands of the desert where he eventually found a dark cave. He thought, "I can find God here. I will be alone and nothing will disturb me." He prayed day and night in the cave, but God sent him many temptations. He imagined all the good things in life and wanted them desperately, but he was determined to give up everything and be with God alone. After many months, the temptations stopped and the young man was alone with God.

Then one day God called to him, "Leave your cave and go to a distant town. Look for the local shoemaker. Knock on his door and stay with his family for a few days." The holy hermit was puzzled by God's request, but nonetheless left the next morning. He walked across the desert sands and by nightfall had reached the village. He found a small house, knocked on the door and was greeted with a smile and a welcome. The hermit inquired if the man was the local shoemaker. Hearing that he was, the hermit was pleased. The shoemaker, seeing that the hermit was tired and hungry invited him in to stay. The hermit was given a hearty meal and a clean place to sleep. The hermit stayed with the shoemaker and his family for three days. The two men talked quite a bit and the hermit learned much about the shoemaker, but he revealed little about himself, even though the family was quite curious about him.

Then after three days the hermit said good-bye to the shoemaker and his family and walked back across the desert to his cave, wondering all the while why God had sent him on this mission. When he arrived back at the cave, God questioned the hermit. "What was the shoemaker like?" The hermit answered, "He is a simple man; they have a small home. He has a wife and a baby. They seem to love each other greatly. He has a small shop where he makes shoes. He works very hard and makes very little, but he still gives money and food to those who are less fortunate. He and his wife pray each day; they have lots of friends." God listened to the hermit and replied, "You will be a great saint, as you wish, but the shoemaker and his family will be great saints as well."

The legend of Saint Antony of the Desert describes what sainthood is all about, namely leading a life of holiness. Today's Gospel Reading, while describing the career of John the Baptist, centers upon the actual baptism of Jesus. Baptism, the first & premier sacrament, is a call to discipleship that may be lived in many ways, but the central call for all who follow in the footsteps of the Master is to live a holy life. Antony discovered there were many paths to God and sainthood. We must see our call to be disciples, to live holy lives consistent with Jesus' message of peace, humility, and love.

Saint Mark's version of the baptism of Jesus is rather brief, only 3 verses. Nonetheless, we learn some very important things about our Lord. We learn of the connection between Jesus, God, & the Spirit. Today's Gospel Reading is one of the few places in the New Testament where there is a rather clear reference to the Trinity. Jesus is baptized, the Spirit descends upon him like a dove, & God speaks from the heavens, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Jesus' baptism was the necessary prelude to his public ministry. Jesus' life in Nazareth moves to a public life as Jesus begins his ministry as Messiah. John's baptism of Jesus, while unnecessary to remove sin, is a powerful sign of the Lord being commissioned by God to begin God's salvific mission. In a similar way, all Christians are commissioned by baptism to do our share in building God's kingdom on earth. The methods & means will vary, but the baptized, all who bear the name Christian, are called to live holy lives, drawing ourselves & others closer to God

The commission that Jesus gave his followers was actually proclaimed just prior to the Ascension. Jesus addressed his disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20). The words of Jesus echo with a command, a privilege, & a challenge. The Lord has challenged us to go forward as disciples & share his message with others. As God's children through baptism we are privileged to share God's life, but this privilege comes with a command. Baptism, the sacrament which unites all Christians in one family, also unites us in the common call to discipleship.

The concept of baptism as a rite is straightforward, but the responsibilities that come with this sacrament are more complex. We all know that baptism makes us children of God and all the privileges that come with this elect position. Baptism is a call to discipleship – but what exactly is discipleship? Discipleship may be defined in many ways, but three principal aspects are crucial. To be a disciple first means to be a follower. Through baptism we become followers of Jesus and the church. Baptism next calls us to ministry, the work of a disciple. Lastly, discipleship requires that we become evangelists in response to Jesus' command to go and make disciples of all nations. The process of being a follower of Jesus necessitates our total dedication to his principles and message. We cannot be a follower some days and one who goes it alone on others. Our mind must be fixed on the Lord. Peter puts it well, "Baptism ... now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." Baptism is more than an act, it is a promise.

Whether we knew it or not our baptism bound us to Christ and the church. Thus, our attitude must be to seek union with God and God's people.

Following Jesus is not easy; nobody said it would be. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, well-known Lutheran theologian, was executed by the Nazis at the end of World War II. He knew that the price to be a true follower would be high. In his famous book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer says that to be a follower of Jesus will cost us everything in this life, but will also lead to eternal life. Bonhoeffer knew and believed what the scriptures say concerning our baptism into Christ's death and how it leads to life. Paul (Colossians 2:12) wrote, "When you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead."

Discipleship requires us to minister to God's people. The tendency for many is to think that only certain people are called to ministry – one must have a vocation for such work. All of us, however, are called to work in the vineyard of the Lord. As Jesus states (Luke 10:2), "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." We are the workers; we are the Body of Christ. We are members of the priesthood of believers. Whatever our vocation, the single life, marriage and family, or the active ministry, we are all one through baptism. Again Paul wrote (1 Corinthians 12:13), "For in the one spirit we are all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we are all made to drink of one spirit." As members of the one body, as brothers and sisters in the Lord, our ministry is a service to God and God's people.

Within the Body of Christ we minister in specialized ways. Ordained ministry, a special invitation to discipleship, is a vehicle to minister in ways which can touch many people. Ministers, through the sacraments preaching, serve all God's people & provide a special face to the presence of God in our world. This is the essential work of discipleship. But all believers are called to be "Disciples of Christ."

Jesus commands us to be evangelists, to go forth and spread his message. When we think of evangelism the image of the street-corner preacher comes to mind. Ministry and service are not optional works for Christians; all are called to work in God's vineyard. How many of us have been touched by the works and service of others? When we see someone who reaches out to another, like Mother Teresa of Calcutta or Bishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa, we are challenged to go the extra mile for those who need our assistance. The actions of others encourage us to act; their service becomes an example of evangelism. Active ministry and service to others is something in which we can participate each day. There are formal ministries in the church and the community, but more commonly service is performed in everyday events that few think

is of any significance. Courtesy in our manner of life, calmness in a time of strife, using conciliation over argumentation in time of conflict are all ways of demonstrating service to others and ministry in God's kingdom on earth.

Another important aspect of evangelization is the process of reconciliation. The ability to admit one's brokenness, especially before another, is an act of evangelism. How many times have we been inspired and had our hearts lifted by seeing another turn away from evil and begin a new path which leads to God? Baptism is a rebirth into the life of repentance. Scripture states, as we just heard, that John the Baptist came as a precursor of the Lord to provide a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins

. When one turns away from sin and begins anew, the value of such an act is incalculable. Repentance and reconciliation require courage and provide a challenge for others to seek a similar road in their lives.

Baptism as a call to discipleship is an active sacrament; it is anything but passive. The hermit, Antony, learned that sainthood came in many forms, but all required a life of holiness that in some ways actively sought God. Baptism calls us to be followers, ministers, and evangelists. We must live the vocation of holiness to which we have all been called. Our call is to be members with all the privileges which come with being part of God's family. Our membership gives us responsibility as well. We must go forth in an active manner to do God's work in our world. Baptism is the original call to a life which seeks to bring others closer to God. May the baptism that we all share, our common denominator in the faith, allow us to be disciples and show the face of God to others, drawing them and ourselves one step closer to eternal life, God's promise to all who believe.