

Sermon for January 13, 2019
Baptism of Our Lord Sunday
“Knowing God: Your Calling”

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

As a preacher I have a lot of people ask me about my call into the ministry. They want to know, did I hear an actual voice calling me like Samuel in the Old Testament? Did I see a blinding light like Paul on the road to Damascus? Was there some cataclysmic event in my life that showed me God wanted me to go in the direction I was going? Some people ask because they are curious, but some ask because they are skeptical. They are uncomfortable with the idea that God calls certain people. They are looking for an authority to support their skepticism and say that God doesn't really call people.

God does call people. I know that because God called me. I heard no audible voice calling me, but I did experience a constant pulling within me. As a child if you asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up it was usually something like an oceanographer or astronomer. But when I was about ten I started saying a preacher. I felt that my interest in the stars and nature was really because God made it all. My parents took me seriously enough to take me to talk to the preacher about it.

For a long time I felt that pulling, but there were doubts. While I was in High School those doubts began to diminish. I began to "hear" more and more clearly a call into the ministry. At times I doubted if that really meant preaching. Maybe it was music ministry. I was good at science and math maybe it was to be a missionary that builds bridges and digs wells. By the time I got to college I was preparing to go to seminary to be a preacher.

The last time I doubted my call was during my freshman year at USC. I began to think to myself that life would be a lot easier if I became an engineer or entered the computer field. I could finish school in four years and go to work and I could get a nine to five job. But as I was thinking about this while walking across campus it hit me like a ton of bricks. I could become an engineer or go into computers, but I would only be living. The only way I could find fulfillment was to take the more difficult road of becoming a preacher. I can still show you the place on USC's campus where that realization took place. I wasn't blinded by a light from heaven, but God did shed a light on the path I was to follow to do his will. I didn't hear a voice from heaven, but I did feel an assurance in my heart that I heard God's call to me.

The reason I share this is that the passage I read from Luke is really Jesus' call to ministry. I know it may seem odd to speak of Jesus being called to the ministry. After all he was born the Son of God, right? But for years he lived the life of an average Jewish man. Presumably he was a carpenter like Joseph his foster father. Sometimes these years are called the "hidden years" because the Bible tells us nothing about them.

But somehow through the ministry of John, Jesus heard the call that the time had come for him to begin teaching and healing. That the time had come for him to begin his earthly ministry and the journey to the cross the tomb and beyond. So Jesus responded to that pull on his life by going to John to be baptized. And God said, "You are my Beloved Son, with you I am well pleased," God was calling Jesus into action.

Names are important. They are more than just labels. When you give something or someone a name that name denotes a function or role. A dining room is a place for dining. An automobile is to make you mobile by means of mechanical automation. In the same way God called Jesus "My beloved son." That title assumed certain responsibilities. Because Jesus was the Son of God, he was expected to be the Messiah who saved the world by serving, suffering, dying, and rising again.

It's important to note that Jesus' call into action took place at his baptism. Through this event God expanded the meaning and role of baptism. For the Jews a baptism was a ritual washing. The Greek word for baptism "*baptizo*" literally means, "to wash." The Jews were constantly baptizing people and things. If something or someone was unclean they would baptize it. If someone died on a bed it would be unclean by contact with a dead body. So they would ritually wash it or baptize it. When the Pharisees criticize Jesus for not washing his hands, they literally asked why Jesus doesn't "baptize" his hands. That is what John was doing at the river Jordan. He was ritually washing people. They came confessing their sins and repenting, and he was washing them to ritually demonstrate the change taking place within them.

At Jesus' baptism God changed that understanding. How do we know that God intended to change all that. First of all John had prophesied this change. He said I baptize with water, but the one who comes will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Secondly, Jesus didn't need to be baptized in the Jewish sense. He was sinless. He had no sin to repent of or confess. He was pure and didn't need to be purified. That's why John tried to stop Jesus. It is obvious that the Father had other things in mind when he led Jesus to be baptized.

The events of Jesus' baptism show us this new meaning. First of all after Jesus was baptized the Holy Spirit descended on him. This shows us that Baptism was no longer merely a ritual cleansing, but through Christ it became a means of God's holy presence. Baptism became a symbol of the giving of the Holy Spirit. Secondly, it was at his baptism that God named Jesus as God's son and called him into service. In the Christian Church baptism identifies a person as a member of God's family and calls them into ministry. So a baptism symbolizes the presence of God with a person calling them to serve in the way they live their lives.

The logical result of all this is that everyone who is baptized is called. Not everyone is called to be a preacher, but all of us have a calling. Because we have been baptized we are a part of God's Holy Church. We are self-acknowledged members of the Family of God. When we are baptized by water and the Spirit we are marked as servants of God. The ritual of Baptism that we perform in the church is a symbolic representation of God adopting us. Baptism is the ritual by which we enter God's church. In some churches the baptism font is placed at the front door. Because the front door is where one enters the church physically. And the Baptismal font is where one enters the church spiritually.

This identity or place in God's Family given to us at baptism is also a call to ministry. God called Jesus "My beloved son" and at that point he began his work as the Messiah, the Savior of the world. Through your baptism God has claimed you as a son or daughter. And as a result you have a calling, a role in God's family. As sons and daughters of God we are called to live lives of righteousness. We are called to live like our Lord and be servants to our Father's will.

That service takes many different forms. For me it meant taking the long path to seminary and the parish ministry. For others it could mean any number of things. It could mean missionary work, or Christian education. It could mean serving God through volunteering for United Ministries or Habitat or any of the other ministries in our community. It could mean dedicating oneself to study and prayer. It could mean serving in a local church as a leader or teacher. Often times our secular jobs can be a calling. I had a church member who was a principle in an elementary school. I asked him to talk to the Youth once. He told them that he saw himself as a missionary at the elementary school where he worked. His job was to live out the love of God and help nurture the minds of the children that attended there. Singing in the Choir, teaching Sunday School, cleaning up after a Wednesday night Supper are all forms of service. Your calling may change as you mature and change. Jesus' ministry changed over the years. He began as a healer and teacher. But later he took on the priestly role of sacrificing himself for our sins. Callings come in many different forms, but they all are ways of serving God.

We know God through our baptism. We know that we are called and claimed as children of God. Though our baptism we are given a place in God's family. As part of the family we are given a role in that family; a calling.

Jesus' Baptism gives us a model for understanding our calling. His calling came during a ritual cleansing. Likewise, we have to give ourselves to Christ to accept our calling. To be ready to receive our call we must be willing to leave the old behind and move on. We have to be willing to accept the forgiving grace that God is pouring out upon us. To accept Christ as our example and redeemer.

At Jesus' baptism God claimed him as God's own. In the same way God claims us. When we dedicate ourselves to Christ, God adopts us as children. And that identity is our calling. We are all Children of God by creation, but God calls us to act like Children of God. We are called to imitate the grace and love of our Heavenly Father, and to follow in the footsteps of our big brother Jesus.

Like Christ we are called to a life of service. Jesus responded to his call by becoming the Savior of the world. Follow in Jesus' footsteps and respond to your call. And God the Father will affirm your response and pour out the Holy Spirit on you.