A Sermon for DaySpring

By Tiffani Harris

*Christ’s Baptism, Our Vocation*

Matthew 3:13-17

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If I’m truly honest, the baptism of Jesus has always made me just a little uneasy. It has taken me a while to put my finger on it and to uncover what it is about Jesus’ baptism that seems out of place. John the Baptizer, the cousin of Jesus, was offering a baptism of repentance . . . and Jesus being the Son of God, living a sinless life needed no repentance yet he chose baptism. Why? Surely, it was not some hoop he had to jump through. Well, come to find out, I am in good company as I am not the only one to take pause with Christ’s baptism. All four Gospels address the baptism and the Spirit’s affirmation of Christ in different ways as if the writers seem to wrestle with it as well.[[1]](#endnote-1) The early church wrestled with it and even John the Baptist pushed back against it.

Jesus’ baptism was not some impulsive, spur of the moment decision. He purposely traveled out of his way from Galilee to get to John at the Jordan River. Realizing Jesus’ request, John immediately objected saying, “I need to be baptized by you”[[2]](#endnote-2) . Then Christ reminded him, that this was a part of God’s plan.[[3]](#endnote-3) It was time, and Christ was compelled. Being fully human, Jesus had choice and agency. Being fully divine he lived without sin and did not need to repent.[[4]](#endnote-4) So, what is going on here? Jesus was answering a call, a summons from his Father. He was saying “yes” in baptism. Leaving his family and that particular religious community, he walked to the river to be baptized by a camel-haired, locust-eating, eccentric cousin.

In the midst of this mysterious yes, God the Father interrupts the scene, blesses his son, and anoints him with the Holy Spirit. This Trinitarian[[5]](#endnote-5) moment inaugurates the beginning of Christ’s ministry. Here, baptism is a turning point.

The early church was also concerned with why Jesus was baptized by John.[[6]](#endnote-6) John gave a Jewish baptism of repentance and remission of sin. Jesus could have baptized himself and he could have baptized John. Instead, he submitted himself to God’s call, submitted himself to John, and was baptized with the crowd of people coming to the Jordan seeking a new start and new life with God. This was a communal act. Having traveled at least a day with the pilgrims walking to the river, Christ aligns himself with all who have need of God – with those who suffer, with the tired and weary, with those hungering for renewal. Christ’s humanity is on full display.

Emmanuel, God With Us, wades into the waters with us. We see here that baptism is about a new creation –

We may be tempted to reduce baptism to a symbol or a rite of passage, but it is more than that.

The mystery in baptism[[7]](#endnote-7) is more than we can articulate at times. In this baptismal moment, Jesus answered a summons from God and accepted his vocation. Christ’s submission is the beginning of his earthly ministry. We don’t like to talk about submission much, but it is unavoidable in this instance as Christ embodies what he will pray in the future: “not my will but yours be done.”

This individual act of follow-ship is for the sake of creating a new community of God.[[8]](#endnote-8) And so, it is for us as well. Baptismal waters stay with us. When we are submerged in the water, we are saying more than our sins are forgiven and washed away, we are raised to walk in new life with a renewed blessing of God’s beloved-ness upon us.

I have truly enjoyed walking with our children at DaySpring as they prepare for baptism. One of the concepts we explore together are the many different baptism stories in Acts as well as the baptism of Jesus. We discover together how the Holy Spirit shows up differently in each story of those baptized. In Acts 16 both Lydia and the Philippian jailer are transformed after baptism.

They are filled with hospitality, compassion, and courage, and they are empowered to share the good news with others. This same work of the Holy Spirit is in all of us for the building up of the community of God.

In Christ’s baptism the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove. Still wet with the water of baptism, those witnesses who had walked with Jesus to the Jordan, now hear the blessing of God upon Christ: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” They witness Christ’s ordination. In this baptismal moment, Christ claim’s his identity, denying the identity that the world would try to give him. The Jewish culture wanted a Messiah who would be a powerful political king. Jesus, however chose to walk with us as a humble servant.

The same Spirit that descended upon Christ, then led him into the wilderness to wrestle with his vocation. The temptation and wilderness will come – for each of us. Baptism does not insulate us from harsh challenges – for this is our journey. The same Spirit that blessed Christ as beloved also sustained him in the desert. The same Spirit enabled Christ to refute false identity and self-seeking affirmation of his temptation.

The world will always try to identify us or label us: gifted, average, super mom, failure, accomplished, or lazy… Often these labels are: you are not good enough, pretty, strong, smart enough… We all struggle with shedding the identity that we and society place upon ourselves.

In baptism, however, we are named by God[[9]](#endnote-9) and we have a change of identity[[10]](#endnote-10). No longer do we have to strive to be enough.

Max Lucado tells a story of a wooden boy named Punginello who lives in a village where everyone places stickers on each other. These stickers represent failures and accomplishments and are on display for all to see. Punginello becomes so worried about these stickers that he doesn’t want to go outside anymore for fear of getting more stickers that show his failures. One day he meets a girl who has no stickers at all. He has never seen someone in the village with no stickers, and she reminds him that he should visit the carpenter who made him. She makes sure she visits the carpenter, “the Maker,” every day. After finally visiting the Maker, he reminds Punginello who he is created to be. Punginello remembers his identity and slowly the stickers begin to fall off with each subsequent visit with his Maker.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Knowing our beloved-ness changes things and defines our vocation. Our old identities are buried through baptism and we claim God’s affirmation that we are a beloved child of God. The idea of Christian vocation has been the subject of consideration for centuries. Origen and Augustine argued that vocation encompassed a call for all Christians[[12]](#endnote-12) to bear witness to Christ in our daily lives. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote and experienced that saying “yes” to God means an “emphatic no” to something else, namely allegiance to the world, culture, or society.[[13]](#endnote-13) This is no easy task.

Vocation means call or summons[[14]](#endnote-14) and in Greek forms the root for *ekklesia*. The church then, is comprised of those who are called out.[[15]](#endnote-15) Quaker educator, Parker Palmer, explains in his book *Let Your Life Speak* that vocation is linked with identity – our purpose is found in our design.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Knowing who we are is essential to living out our Christian vocation.

The Apostle Paul continues to remind himself and us of this vocational calling, writing to those “called to be saints” who are “set apart for the Gospel” [[17]](#endnote-17)[[18]](#endnote-18) urging them and us to live out our Christian vocation. The prophet Isaiah reminds us that you children of God are called in righteousness, the Lord has taken you by the hand and kept you and given you to be a light to the nations . . . to bring out from prison those who sit in darkness.[[19]](#endnote-19) Light shines brightest in the darkness, and with the power of the Holy Spirit, we are light bearers.

During this season of Epiphany, we celebrate God’s light coming to all corners of the world. God continues to break through and in to our world -- just as God did at the baptism of Jesus when the curtain between heaven and earth parted in that liminal space. Let us linger for just a moment to notice this interrupting God who claims us as his own.

Each Sunday, during the benediction we are blessed and sent out to bear witness to the light and peace of Christ – to do this well, we need each other. How might we walk alongside of each other in living our vocation? Consider one thing you can do this week to remind yourself or someone else of God’s claim upon your life. How might we let go of the names and labels we are tempted to wear? Maybe this week, you purposefully pray about one temptation that trips you up. Maybe we ask a friend to hold us accountable. DaySpring is a place where we can do this well – we value honesty. During the offering today, let us also offer up to God the temptations we are called to reject – the labels and names that we wear that keep us from embracing our call as a beloved child of God.

As we come to receive the bread and the juice today for communion, let us hear and receive once more, the word of God that you are God’s beloved.

So Beloved of God, children of the Light, go and live out our baptisms and our baptismal promise

to be light bearers in this broken world. Do not be discouraged by the depth of brokenness or dismayed by the turmoil, but go forth living out the love and light of Christ. Amen.

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Endnotes

1. See *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament by R. T. France (Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007) p. 118. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Chromatus on Matthew 3, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Intervarsity Press, 2001) ed. By Thomas C. Oden, p. 49-54. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See *Matthew* by Warren Carter, (Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. 1996) p. 129. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. (Cyril of Alexandria was especially concerned about not confusing Christ as one repenting: “In the times before Christ’s coming, those being baptized were held down in the water a longer time for the confession of sin. But Christ, being sinless, ‘came up immediately.’ For Christ was not baptized as one repenting but as one cleansing sins and sanctifying the waters.” Cyril of Alexandria, ECC p. 53) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Augustine, ACC p. 49-54. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See Anonymous, Jerome, Chromatus, Origen, ACC p. 49-54. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See Brueggeman, The Work of the People website (theworkofthepeople.com): “Baptism” [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The Old Testament concern for the call of God generally pertains to community and “relies upon, in part the individuals and families who refuse to be drawn off into the culture” of their captivity or society. (Conyers, p. ) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Rachel Held Evans, The Work of the People website: “Baptism” [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See N.T. Wright, The Work of the People website: “Baptism” [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. *You Are Special* by Max Lucado. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Conyers, Chip “The Meaning of Vocation” in *Christian Reflection* (Baylor University, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Conyers, p. 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Vocatio – Latin, call or summons. (see Conyers) [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Klesis – Greek cleric; ekklesia – those who are called out (see Conyers) [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See also Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Romans 1:1, Romans 1:7, 1 Corinthians 1:2 [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Pauline doctrine of the “body of Christ” (hands, feet, eyes) remind us that vocation is directly linked to the greater community while also highlighting the stark differences and distinctness within the larger Christian community. (See also Conyers p.15) [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Isaiah 42:6 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)