

Following Your Calling
Matthew 3:13-17
January 27, 2008

Baptism is a sign that a person has changed course. The picture of one going down into the water is a rather dramatic way to tell the world "I'm starting over. My life is now moving in a new direction." Baptism is a very open and public confession that one's life is in process of change.

Why do you think Jesus came to John to be baptized? John is calling for people to be baptized as a sign of their repentance from sin, but the Bible makes it very clear that Jesus was no sinner. So why does Jesus come to be baptized?

Even John wonders. He takes one look at Jesus and declares, "I need to be baptized by you." The presence of Jesus moves John to recognize him as a holy man. John sees into the heart of Jesus and sees one who is without fault, without sin.

Jesus tells John why he comes: "to fulfill all righteousness." In short, Jesus is saying that the baptism is simply God's will for his life. "Let's get on with it, John," Jesus says. "It's the right thing to do. Baptism fulfills God's will for my life."

I wonder why Jesus chose this particular moment to be baptized? Scholars tell us that Jesus was probably around thirty years old when he was baptized. Why didn't his baptism take place when he was thirteen, the year when most Jewish boys went through Bar Mitzvah? The Bible doesn't let us in on that bit of information.

But I think we can infer from this passage and many others that the leading of God had something to do with it. We can know God only because God chooses to make himself known. Matthew 16 clearly tells us that God alone initiates the making of his presence known to us. Acts 2 states that the early church's growth was as a direct result of God adding people to the church. John 15 explains that God chooses us in establishing his relationship with us. We do not find God; God finds us and reveals himself to us.

But still Jesus had to be open to God, sensitive to God's Spirit in his life. Jesus had to live within listening distance of God. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is shown to be a man of prayer, a person who rose early in the morning to his Father in prayer. No doubt while praying one day, while attentive to God, Jesus felt the Spirit of God tug at his heart and knew it was time.

Yet God can sometimes break through to the heart of those who are far from him--a tax-collector, a thief, a prostitute. God surprises the people who feel unworthy of his love by making his presence known to them.

My dad was a career military man and could be crude and gruff. His language was often salted with some rather interesting words and he had a habit of using his colorful language at the most embarrassing times. In conversation with a chaplain, or a school teacher or the neighbor next door, one never knew what my dad was going to say nor how he would say it. Few people would have thought of my dad as a religious man.

Dad had a severe stroke while I was still in high school. He was never the same after his stroke. His strong body rapidly wasted away as his muscles atrophied. He walked with a distinct limp and never could use his left hand afterwards.

His crudeness was not taken away by the stroke. He continued to swear and curse whenever he felt like it, which was quite often. When I told him that I was going to become a preacher he wasn't too happy at first. He said a few choice swear words letting me know of his displeasure. But he gradually came around. He would even come to hear me preach on occasion when I was in college.

One hot summer evening I had been invited to speak at a Freewill Baptist Church not far from where we lived and Dad came to hear me preach. I had managed to memorize a Billy Graham sermon word for word and I was anxious to try it out. I guess I memorized it a little too well. At the conclusion of the sermon in a tiny little church of about thirty-five people or so, I issued the invitation. It went something like this: "I want scores of you to come. If you came on the bus,

they will wait for you. If you're in the balcony, we'll wait for you." People begin looking at one another with more than just a little amusement. There weren't any buses outside nor was there a balcony in the tiny church.

While the congregation tried to hold in their snickering and giggling, my dad got up from one of the pews and walked down the aisle. At first I thought he was coming down to tell me how embarrassed he was to have such a stupid son, but when he finally made his way down the front he told me he wanted to be baptized. He wanted to become a Christian. It was a startling moment.

One morning a few weeks later, Dad and I were talking in the living room where he was reading a Bible, something I had never seen him do before. When I asked him why he decided to be baptized, he said, "I don't know. It was just there in my heart. And I didn't think I should say 'no' to my heart."

Why then? Why did my dad come to open his heart to God at that particular time? I don't know.

God works in deeply mysterious ways. We can't reason God out. He defies being put into a box of logic. We simply have to listen to the stirrings of our hearts. Religious faith and science differ in that respect. Science seeks to test theories through experiment. When experiments give the same results time after time, a theory is said to have been proven. But faith doesn't work the way of science. Religious faith doesn't follow certain patterns. The Spirit moves as the Spirit wills and that makes religious faith impossible to pin down. Jesus said the Spirit of God is like the wind. We can't tell from where the wind comes nor do we know for sure where it goes.

I spoke to a nine or ten year old a few weeks ago and he told me he wanted to be baptized. I asked him why he wanted to be baptized and he said, "Because my heart says that it is time." Now I suppose we preacher types might be tempted to dismiss this kind of response as childish and immature but we better be careful. I'm not sure there is a better response as to why a person is baptized. I think Jesus must have just felt it was the right time to be baptized; he felt it in his heart just like all the rest of us.

There is a danger if we say "no" to the moving of God's Spirit within our hearts. The Bible warns us that God's Spirit will not always strive with man. I suppose this verse could be understood in a number of ways but one thing is clear: Every time you say "No" to God's Spirit a callous begins to form around your heart. It doesn't take long before that callous makes your heart impenetrable, and your heart cannot respond to the sound of God's voice.

Growing deaf to God's voice can happen at any time in our lives. Even Christians can become dumb to God's voice. God seldom screams at us. His voice is a gentle whisper and if we are going to hear him we must listen very attentively. We must learn the sound of his voice by listening to him every day. The constant noise from our world makes it very challenging to be able to distinguish his voice from all the others.

Jesus spent his life listening carefully to God. As soon as Jesus came up out of the water, the Spirit of God descended upon him and a voice announced, "This is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased." This phrase is from two passages of scripture in the Old Testament. The first part, "This is my Son," comes from Psalm 2. Psalm 2 was used during the king's coronation ceremony. Whoever was king of Israel was considered to be an adoptive son of God. But Jesus, of course, was no mere adoptive son; He is truly God's Son. He alone is the true King of Israel. Israel yearned for a perfect King who would rule with justice and compassion, and finally God announced that in Jesus not just Israel but the whole world would have such a King.

The second part of the verse is found in Isaiah 42. Isaiah 42 has been tagged by biblical scholars as one of the great Servant Songs in the Book of Isaiah (also 49, 53). Throughout this section of the Bible a mysterious servant of God is pictured who will suffer greatly on behalf of God's people. This servant will endure great hardship in caring for God's people. In other words, the servant will suffer on behalf of his people.

This little phrase ("This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased") contains an incredible insight into the nature of Jesus. Even though he is God's Son, he comes to serve. He is a Servant-King. The entire ministry of Jesus illustrated that he was a Servant-King. He said I have come not to be served, but to serve. Hours before his death, he washed the disciples' feet. He lived a life of humble service, serving the weak, the people on the margins of life and all who were in need.

Baptism was the launching pad of Jesus' ministry. It signaled that now his life would be devoted to his ministry. After his baptism Jesus would never go back to his old life. Baptism was the pivotal turning point of his life.

Baptism is our call to enter into God's service, too. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus commands his disciples to baptize people who desire to follow him. Baptism marks the beginning of our life of service. Martin Luther often said to his people, "Remember your baptism, remember your baptism." What in the world did Luther mean by that? Luther's people were baptized as infants and would not be able to remember their baptism. So why did he ask them to remember? Luther said to remember that through our baptism we belong to God. And because we belong to God we are to do the work of God in the world. To do God's work is our business; it is why we are here on earth.

I have a friend who spent several tours of duty in Vietnam as a Marine. One night in an Officers Club he and a few other chaps had one or two too many and they got into a fight. It didn't take long for the MP's to break the fight up and haul everyone off to the brig. Early the next morning my friend heard the voice of his CO bellowing through the brig. He was shouting the names of his officers who were in brig. He shouted to the MP in charge to release all of these men at once. The MP hesitated for a few moments not sure what he should do. Then the Lt. Colonel shouted, "Look, these men are mine. They belong to me and I've got work for them to do."

God has work for you to do. You may be a business man, a housewife, a school teacher or a student, but if you have been baptized, then your calling is to do the work of God in the world. Baptism reminds us that we have been called to serve. We, too, are sons and daughters of God, and we have been called to serve. Baptism reminds us that our life is all about God. Baptism reminds us that we are priests to the world. Our calling is to build bridges of grace between the world and God.

Remember your baptism. Baptism signifies that you belong to Christ. Remember: "Because of your desire to follow the Lord Jesus Christ from this day forward, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Dead with Christ, buried, risen to walk in newness of life." Do you remember? Amen.