

Baptism of Our Lord, January 8, 2017

Baptism, Belief, Calling, and Responding to God

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Moses did it. So did Jeremiah, and Isaiah. Jonah was more honest and upfront about it. All of these leaders and prophets of the Old Testament share the common trait of refusing God when God called them to do something God wanted them to do: whether it was confronting Pharaoh and leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, or bringing God's message to people who might not want to hear it. Most of them refused God by way of giving excuses and God always responded by giving them what they thought they needed to help them. Only Jonah refused by saying he didn't like the people God wanted him to bring a message to, and if you read his story in the book of the Bible that bears his name, you would see there are things that matter more to God than what you and I like, and Jonah ended up going anyway.

So perhaps it shouldn't surprise us in our Gospel today when we encounter another leader and prophet of God refusing to do what God asked or wanted when we heard that John the Baptist responded to Jesus' appearing for baptism by first trying to prevent it. It is an interesting conversation between Jesus and John the Baptist, one that we only find in Matthew's Gospel. While all the Gospels include Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan River, only Matthew tells of John's initial refusal to give Jesus what he wanted.

This has not gone unnoticed by scholars, who have a lot to say on the subject. Scholars tell us that the baptism of Jesus is historical because all four Gospels record it and because it was a source of embarrassment for early Christians. That feeling of embarrassment really comes out when John the Baptist said he felt he should be baptized by Jesus, not the other way round. John seems to be indicating there is a hierarchy that Jesus is breaking, as Jesus is the Messiah, not John, and that made the situation uncomfortable. The author of Matthew seems to fix the discomfort by having Jesus respond to John by saying it is God's will and submitting to God's will, even if it didn't seem to make sense, worked for John, and so he baptized Jesus.

But since refusing God seems to be a Biblical tradition, perhaps there is more to it than fixing historical embarrassment. It seems to me that we can learn a lot by observing how God responded to the refusal of those Old Testament prophets, and how Jesus responded to John's refusal. First, God let them all say no, which shows that the relationship between people and God is not one where God is a type of puppet master pulling strings and people are forced to respond without free will. Having the gift of free will means we can tell God no, and even the most honored Biblical prophets have done so.

But just because we can say no doesn't mean God lets that be the end. In all cases, God listened to the reason for the no and responded by providing what was needed. In Moses' case, Moses said he couldn't do as God asked because he had a speech problem, so God said he could take his brother Aaron to speak for him. Isaiah also said he didn't have the words to say, and God provided a vision where an angel held a holy burning coal to his lips which gave him God's words. In both cases, each man tried to give the excuse that they were not worthy, not good enough for God, and God responded by showing how God sees people differently. For God, it seems, talents or skills or abilities don't seem to matter. God didn't choose neither Moses nor Isaiah for their ability to speak, God chose them for God's reasons.

If you read other stories in the Old Testament, you would see God often chooses who you or I might judge as the least likely person to represent God. God does not always choose the wealthy nor powerful. God does not always choose the eloquent nor the mature. God does not always choose the first-born son, nor the best looking nor the most fertile. Most often, God chooses the person who seems forgotten, outcast, the least skilled. That person, God will say is worthy of God's calling not because of their attributes, but simply because that is who God chose.

When a person says no to God in the Old Testament, they show us they don't feel worthy, or they feel afraid, and God calms those fears and feelings of unworthy-ness. It seems God notices everyone, not just the popular, and God sees us through the eyes of God's love, not humanity's biases.

We could almost see that same idea of not being worthy in John's refusal to baptize Jesus. Again, we saw Jesus listened to John, and responded to John's refusal by saying worthiness wasn't his to determine, it was God's. It seemed God wasn't interested in being hierarchically correct, or perhaps it means that the Messiah wasn't about hierarchy at all. Hierarchies have a way of creating

distances between people, and Jesus' birth, life, ministry, death and even in Jesus' resurrection we see Jesus was about being with people, walking among all people, the rich and the poor, the religious and those who weren't, men and women, even children. Jesus stood among the people who came to John seeking baptism of repentance, seeking to have their relationship with God and each other healed and strengthened. That healing and strengthening of relationship seemed to be God's desire too, which is perhaps why Jesus stood where he stood that day at the Jordan River. God didn't become flesh to create more distance between God and people, but to show God is willing to be vulnerable enough to join people in those waters of baptism in order to be with people, not just back then but here and now. With you and with me.

This sense of doing away with distance between people and God can be seen in what happened after Jesus was baptized, when the heavens were opened and the dove descended upon Jesus and the voice from heaven spoke and could be heard. God, it seemed, opened the door of heaven and had come out to be with the people God loves.

An open door like that says a lot. One of the things an open door says is what the person who opened the door thinks about their neighbors. An open door is a sign of trust, one where the neighbor is seen not as a potential threat to hide from or be protected from, but is someone worthy of trust, someone who won't cause harm, someone who might even be a potential friend.

This past summer, here at Church of the Good Shepherd, we chose to open the doors to our chapel downstairs during the week. Until we put windows in those doors a few weeks ago, the doors literally stood wide open to the community. This is a vulnerable thing to do. It is an invitation to anyone and everyone. And just the open door itself can send a huge message to the community, whether or not individual community members choose to come in. The doors say we trust the community. That is enormously counter-cultural in a world that preaches fear, fear of the other, fear of those who would hurt us or steal from us or whatever threat we can imagine. That is why stores and many public buildings have video cameras and locked doors. Locked doors represent the belief that there are no safe places because we are all a potential threat to each other. An open door, though, sends a different message. It says we love you, it says we trust you, it says we believe in the best people can be, and will give the opportunity to share what we have because we want you to come in, we want a relationship with you.

I believe strongly when we as a parish open our chapel doors we are being the best a church can be. We are being Christ-like by showing a bit of what Jesus showed at his baptism: that God isn't about creating more distance or distrust, God is about coming together. Of course, God didn't open the door to heaven so people could wander in, God opened the door to bring God's kingdom of heaven here on earth. It starts in Jesus, and it continues in you and me, as a parish, and as individuals.

In a few moments, we will renew our baptismal vows. In the Book of Common Prayer, we are given the option on a few days to replace the recitation of the Nicene Creed with the renewal of our baptismal vows, and today, the day we remember Jesus' baptism is one of those days. This is one of my favorite things to do in worship services, and I always look forward to it. Because it gives us the opportunity to remember our baptism isn't just something nice that happened to us. Baptism is our response to God who loves us because God wants to love us. You know, God doesn't have to love us, God wants to love us, and because of that love, we are worthy, whether or not, like John the Baptist or any of those folks from the Old Testament, we feel worthy, to live into God's kingdom right here and right now. Our baptismal vows also do something else: they remind us of our beliefs as Christians, and at the same time remind us of what we can do to live into those beliefs. In other words, being a Christian isn't just a belief, it is a way of life based on these beliefs. And sometimes, like those leaders and prophets of old, we might not always feel like we believe, we might have doubts, we might not even like some aspects of our faith, and that is okay. Because God is still with us, and even if we say no, that no is just part of a longer conversation, God is listening and may respond in surprising ways.

Speaking of surprises, today we are also beginning the season of the Epiphany, a word that means "appearing" or "revealing". This church season began on January 6 with the celebration of the visit of the magi, those mysterious visitors from the east, as told in Matthew's Gospel, who followed a star. The season continues with remembering other surprising events such as Jesus' baptism that can reveal to us holy insights such as the nearness of God's love, or the desire of God for healing and renewal in our lives and relationships. And as we enter this new season in the Church year, I believe it is the perfect time to renew our baptismal vows, to renew our commitment to follow Jesus, to turn to God in prayer, to be open to learning through study and community, to refuse evil, to serve, to respect all people, to look for God in all moments, and to let that love of

God shine through us, to open our hearts and our doors. As we renew our baptismal vows today, I invite you to pay attention to them, and notice if one stands out to you, perhaps that might be God nudging you or calling to you. Remember that particular word or sentence that stood out to you, and take it with you, reflect on it, pray about it, and see if there is something revealing or surprising in it for you, a calling for this new year, that may help bring God's kingdom a littler nearer.