

Baptism & Ordination: Chosen and Beloved

Baptism of the Lord Sunday Ordination & Installation of Elders

Mark 1:4-11 Isaiah 43:1-3a Rev. Todd B. Freeman
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa January 11, 2009

What an interesting Service of Worship this is:

- On the liturgical church calendar this is known as **Baptism of the Lord Sunday**, so I will be preaching a sermon on the baptism of Jesus and how that serves as a model for our own baptism;
- later in the service we will participate in the **ordination and installation of elders** to serve on the session;
- and finally we will join in the celebration of **the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper**, reminding us of our unity in Christ.

Even with all these different elements of worship, however, there is still a simple message for us this morning: **each of us has been called by God, by name; called to be a part of the family of God; and called for service in furthering the kingdom of God.**

Today's scripture lessons have much insight to share with us concerning this. The Gospel of Mark, as I mentioned in a sermon on John the Baptist last month, begins not with a birth narrative of Jesus, but rather by introducing us to this man named John, who appeared in the wilderness proclaiming of a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Mark then quickly introduces us to an adult Jesus, who was probably around 30 years old, with the words, "In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." So here, by only the ninth verse in the Gospel in Mark, Jesus is being baptized. What Mark never fully explains, however, is why Jesus came to John in the first place to be baptized. But we do have an understanding of its importance.

At one level, I agree with those who believe that **functionally, Jesus' baptism served somewhat the same purpose as an ordination and installation service.** This is why I say that. As Presbyterians, we view the act of **ordination** (whether it be to the office of minister of Word & Sacrament, or elder, or

deacon) as **the public acknowledgment that through the nominating process and vote of the congregation, that a person has been called by God for a specific duty and function in the church.**

In ordination, we follow the historic practice of **laying on of hands**, a practice we claim can be traced back to the disciples themselves. While there is nothing magical about it, we do believe that it stands as a sign and symbol that God has called that person by name, and will empower those who are ordained with the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit to help them fulfill their duties and responsibilities in leading and guiding the church.

It is important to remember that being called to serve as an elder isn't a popularity contest, or some kind of reward for being a good church member. Rather it is **a call to service**, to help the congregation to fulfill the ministry we believe God is calling us to fulfill.

This morning we will be ordaining two persons to serve as Presbyterian elders, **Molly Dickason** and **Shalece Moback**. Along with **Jim Campbell**, **Marilyn Major**, and **Bill Nole**, who have previously been ordained as Presbyterian elders, they will all be officially installed onto the session, the ruling and governing board of this congregation.

So what does all this have to do with Jesus? **Just like ordination and installation, a public acknowledgment of being called into God's service is indeed part of the meaning of Jesus' baptism.** Jesus' baptism served as an acceptance of not only his place in the family of God, but also of his vocation of spreading the good news of the kingdom of God. We, in turn, through our baptism, come to understand that **we have a similar vocation of living out and spreading the good news of the kingdom of God.**

This story of Jesus' baptism, then, can teach us what happens to us in our own baptism. In verse 10 of chapter 1, Mark tells us that just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. **Like Jesus, in our baptism we are also promised the presence of the Holy Spirit upon and within us.**

Next, Mark writes, "And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" Here's the important part for you and I to consider. If Jesus' baptism serves as a model for our own baptism, which we as Presbyterians believes it does, then do these same words apply to each one of us? **Is God telling you and me personally, 'You are my child, the beloved, with you I am well pleased'?**

I truly believe with my whole heart and mind that each one of us is indeed not only a child of God, but a **beloved** child of God – just as Jesus was. So you believe that as well? And if so, what difference can that make in your life?

At a very deep and basic level, that means that you and I have an important place in the family of God. And because of that, nobody can tell you that your life doesn't matter. Nobody can tell you that you are unloved. Nobody can tell you that you don't belong. Because **in the eyes of God, your life does matter, you are loved, and you do belong!**

Sometimes, however, we listen instead to that voice of rejection that comes from the world around us, and **sometimes that voice of rejection comes from within ourselves**. It is at times like these that we especially need to listen instead to God's voice.

The renowned Catholic priest, Henri Nouwen, wrote an incredible book in 1995 entitled, "Life of the Beloved." In it he writes:

Yes, there is that voice, the voice that speaks from above and from within and that whispers softly or declares loudly: 'You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests.'

It certainly is not easy to hear that voice in a world filled with voices that shout: 'You are no good, you are ugly; you are worthless; you are despicable, [you are an abomination,] you are nobody — unless you can demonstrate the opposite.'

These negative voices are so loud and so persistent that it is easy to believe them. That's the great trap. It is the trap of self-rejection. Over the years, I have come to realize that **the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity or power, but self-rejection...**

As soon as someone accuses me or criticizes me, as soon as I am rejected, left alone or abandoned, I find myself thinking: 'Well, that proves once again that I am a nobody.' Instead of taking a critical look at the circumstances or trying to understand my own and others' limitations, I tend to blame myself — not just for what I did, but for who I am. My dark side says: 'I am no good... I deserve to be pushed aside, forgotten, rejected and abandoned.'

Let me ask you in all seriousness this morning, can you relate in some way to these words and feelings? I wouldn't be surprised if we all can at some level.

But an empowering truth still remains, God is saying to you right now, as God did to Jesus, "You are my child, the beloved, and with you I am well pleased." I encourage you this morning, even challenge you, to **listen for that voice deep within you that calls you "the beloved."**

This, I believe, is the promise of our own baptism, just as it was true in Jesus' baptism. And we can help each other in this regard, right here in this congregation, by reminding each other of this truth. For it is also true that **when we are aware of our own chosenness, our eyes are open to the chosenness of others**. There is a unique, special place for everyone in the kingdom of God, for it is indeed an inclusive place.

So during this coming week and throughout this new year, be attentive to the ways that God is calling you by name and blessing you. Be intentional, as well, to be a blessing to others. In this way we may all come to a deeper

understanding of our own calling and baptism, knowing that it is meant to make us aware of our *identity* as beloved children of God!

And may we continue to strive to be a family of faith that reaches out to the community with the message, "Here at College Hill, you have a place where you can belong."

Amen.