

January 11, 2015

“Anchored and Called”

Sermon by Rev. Robert English



Mark 1: 4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Before all of it, Jesus was first baptized.

Before he healed anyone, before he preached the Good News of God's kingdom, before he was transfigured or he calmed the storm, before he was betrayed, arrested and crucified, before all of it, he was first baptized. Jesus came from his home in Nazareth, made a journey through the Jordan River valley to the place of his baptism.

Jesus, a young man, presented himself to John to be baptized among the gathered community. He waded into the river, humbled himself before John, his cousin, and John baptized him.

And as he came out of the water, something remarkable happened; The in-breaking of God's kingdom becomes evident as the spirit, descending like a dove, anoints him and a voice proclaims 'this is my beloved, with you I am well pleased.'

Before all of it, Jesus was first baptized.

Whether you can remember your baptism or not, baptism for us, as Christians, marks the beginning of a new relationship with God. It is a sacrament, a tangible sign of God's invisible grace. And in this sacrament we are awakened to God's grace anew in our lives.

Being baptized is the very core of our identity. Just like Jesus, it comes before any other identity that might try to stake a claim on our life. We are first baptized, before we do anything, or say anything, or think anything, we are baptized.

We are claimed, we are known, we are loved by God.

This morning, we all have the opportunity to pause at the beginning of this New Year and focus on this core identity; who we are—who we really are—and who God hopes for us to become—in our annual renewal of baptism. On this day, we pause to remember that in our baptism, God calls and names us, gifts us and empowers us to be the person God is creating us to be.

Baptism, because it is the core of our very being, is both an anchor and a calling to each of us. It grounds us first, in our identity as God's beloved and calls us to share that same love and grace with others. In our baptism, God trusts us with the name "child of God" so that, knowing ourselves to be special and loved, we are empowered to spend our lives on others.

Each year as a community we take time to remember and renew the promises that we made or that were made on our behalf. Some of us might be able to recall every detail of our baptism, and for others it may be a bit more fuzzy. If you can't remember the actual day take some time to talk to someone who was there, a parent, God parent, or maybe you can dig through that old paper work or boxes to find a copy of your baptismal certificate or your baptismal candle.

Maybe this journey through living memory or through dusty old boxes could mirror Jesus' journey from Nazareth to the Jordan. Maybe this time could in and of itself anchor you to that moment in your life that marked a new beginning in your relationship with God; as you claimed God's grace in your heart and the in-breaking of God's kingdom burst forth in your life anew. And maybe you can see where this journey of faith has brought you and where God might be leading.

Baptism grounds us and re-creates us each and every day because it is not a one and done kind of deal, but the beginning of an ongoing relationship with God and Christ. This day of renewal gives us the opportunity to consider again the choices we make about who we are and how we live.

We hold this service of baptismal renewal each year because we need to be reminded. It's not always easy to know, or to remember. Life is complicated. Stuff happens. We all have lots of questions, no matter how old or young we are. There are competing claims on us. We can get confused about who we really are.

It's said that Martin Luther, the great German reformer of the church in the 16th century, got up every morning, made the sign of the cross and said: "I am baptized." He centered himself in his true identity as a beloved Child of God. What might change for you this New Year if you started each day this way?

Before everything else, before the morning cup of coffee, before breakfast, before your commute in traffic, to begin each day saying, "I am baptized." To be anchored in this truth: God has created and called **you** by love to be love for the world. Today, with the church universal, in every part of this crazy world, we remember that in our baptism we are anchored to God's great love for us and called to be like bright shining stars.

This is the perfect day to install our new officers and church leaders for 2015. These are folks who have agreed to step up and give of their time and talent and gifts and passion and hopes and dreams to help guide and direct our mission and ministry. Know them, pray for them throughout the year. They're an amazing group of faithful, sincere, dedicated Christians, willing to take on new challenges and opportunities. We are indeed fortunate to celebrate and support their leadership today. All these folks who will stand before us, and all of us in our own way, are given power by the Holy Spirit to live out our baptism. God created each of us with a desire to make a difference.

Baptism is about being anchored in who God is, and being called to be who God wants us to be in this world. To be the kind of person God created us to be, a person who embodies, in our own way, in our own life, in our own family, in our own work, in our own circle of friends—the marks of the Kingdom. Compassion. Justice. Generosity. Caring.

Think about that. God's kingdom is breaking forth in you by the power of the Holy Spirit. The gift of this annual renewal of our baptismal vows is the gift of remembering that and taking responsibility for it.

We are baptized. And that means that God loves us. It means that we are part of God's great economy of love in this world, and that is deeper and stronger than any brand or product or dilemma or challenge we may face. It means that we are set free to fully live, to follow where Christ leads, to give generously of ourselves in service to others, and in all things, to give thanks to God who gives us a future with hope, to be bright shining stars in a world longing for light.

As we move towards baptismal renewal, we will first receive our tithes and offerings. As the offering is received, I'd also like you to take out the index card that was in your OOW this morning and clearly write the name with which you were baptized, your Christian name, first and middle, and bring your card forward when you come to renew your baptismal vows. The pastors will read from these, collect them in the baskets, and then place them all on the altar table this morning, as a symbol of the rededication of our lives to God this day.

If you have not been baptized and would like to be baptized this morning, come to my station and let me know.

After the renewing of your baptism, we will hand you a small white shell. The shell is a symbol of baptism. I invite you to put in a pocket or in your purse or on your nightstand—somewhere you will come across it frequently. And when you see it or find it, say to yourself: "I am baptized" - anchored and called by God's love.

May God bless you to be the person you are created to be, the person God wishes you to be, the person this world needs you to be.

Notes:

I am in debt to Rev. Patricia Farris for some portions of this homily.

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