

“A Sign of Call” by Marjory Bankson

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The First Sunday after the Epiphany

As the terrible events of this week unfolded, I could not imagine how the baptism of Jesus was relevant, but I think the temptation to make the attack on the capitol the center of our attention is exactly what was intended – and we will be better served by focusing on the questions raised by our lectionary text – so here we go.

The text assigned for this morning is the baptism of Jesus. As the story opens, John the Baptist is preaching a new kind of baptism to crowds of people who have come out into the desert to hear him. In this barren landscape, far from the Temple rituals of cleansing and restitution, John proclaims new life for anyone who repents.

Up until then, the Jewish practice of baptism was a minor ritual used for converts, an adult replacement for infant

circumcision. Now John is baptizing Jews who want to renew their covenant with God rather than rely on elaborate Temple rules or worship of the Roman Emperor.

John adds an ethical dimension to baptism that will apply to everybody: "Repent. Turn away from your sins. Give up the illusion of control. And trust that vulnerability is the path to new life." It sounds simple and doable. Confession. A change of direction. A little bit like Alcoholics Anonymous – Step One. Simple, but really difficult.

But John has something more to say. He tells the crowd that someone is coming who will baptize them, not with water, but with the Holy Spirit.

What could that possibly mean – to baptize with the Spirit?

Then Jesus comes. John recognizes him as the promised one, and John claims to be unworthy for the task at hand.

Yesterday, some of you may have read Deborah's profound reflection on InwardOutward.org – that we sometimes try to deny a call that we've been given by saying "I'm not worthy." It's a kind of humble-bragging about being too small or not sufficiently holy to do what we've been asked to do. "Surely you're not asking me to baptize you," John says.

But Jesus insists, and John does baptize Jesus.

I want to highlight this as an act of servant leadership. If it was conventional leadership, John would have been proud to be asked and eager to do it. Instead, he felt unworthy, resisted the call, but did it anyway. We'll come back to that theme of servant leadership in a minute.

What happens next is a critical clue.

As Jesus emerges from his full immersion baptism, the heavens open and Jesus hears a voice saying "You are my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased."

We don't know if anybody else heard those words, but we do know that this baptism marks the beginning of Jesus' ministry. From then on, according to Mark, Jesus acts from that base of being God's beloved – and it means that he is comfortable with the needy and with the powerful because he does not have to curry favor in order to be who he is. He is able to stay connected to his belovedness even when he is afraid.

And, as Deborah said in her InwardOutward post, it's a blessing meant for all of us!

Here are the questions that this text raises for me:

- What if the Holy Spirit is not somewhere else, waiting to come in. Suppose we are born with the Holy Spirit in us already – that it's the very gift of our aliveness.
- What if we have to be taught hateful and separating behaviors, or develop fearful responses – sometimes just to survive. Ask yourself how you learned to be judgmental or afraid.
- What if the spiritual journey is a process of shedding those protective attitudes when they are no longer needed? That would make John's call for repentance an important path to reclaiming the Spirit and knowing we are God's beloved.
- What if “loving your enemy” is a matter of loving that-of-God in another, while rejecting violent or hateful behaviors?
- And what if responding to call is another way to recover our awareness of God-with-us, here and now. Perhaps baptism has a broader meaning than the ritual suggests.

Each of us must find our way to the river for this assurance, because all of us develop various coping skills that separate us from the love of God. For some, those attitudes become destructive, fed by media violence and conspiracy theories. We saw those behaviors on full display this past week.

As we watched the chaos taking place downtown, I felt sick and helpless, but I think the Holy Spirit gives us both courage and resilience to say “Yes, this is part of who we are as Americans – sometimes bigoted, cruel, power-hungry and narrow-minded.” **AND, in addition, to know that we have the power to change, to become the compassionate caring human beings that Jesus showed us how to be.**

I think that’s the secret of John’s baptism of Jesus. It was confirmation of Jesus’ call to begin his ministry of healing and teaching, of opening the gates of heaven to all – to those who could not meet the Temple requirements – and to those who could as well. Jesus showed us the freedom that comes from knowing we are God’s beloved, but each one of us has to find our way to the river – find our way to shed the habits of security and control that give us the illusion of safety, power and control. It’s a lifetime process.

And that brings me back to Seekers as a company of spiritual pilgrims. We can practice each stage of understanding baptism right here and now.

- **First** there is the simple act of joining this body of believers – that was the Jewish understanding of baptism in Jesus’ day.
- **Then** there is John’s understanding of baptism – as an ethical practice of confession, of repentance. We do that, silently or aloud, in worship on Sundays and in our spiritual reports.
- **And finally**, there is Jesus’ experience of baptism in the Spirit – as a living relationship with God in beloved community. Centering prayer and vast silence can be the pathway to that experience of Oneness, listening as well as speaking with God on a daily basis.

Let me close with a practical example of stepping into this river of Spirit:

This week, amid all the stress and distress of the news, each member of Seekers got an email invitation to submit proposals for domestic and international giving. Some of you know what that's about – and some of you are probably puzzled. Why would you be getting this message? And what does it mean?

I see it as a step on the path to freedom from the power of money in our society – a stage of servant leadership.

Each year, the Stewards allocate a certain portion of our budget for missions in which any Seeker is physically involved. These are not just good causes that we know about, but places where we have “skin in the game.” They are organizations where Seekers are already giving our time and energy and money.

Stewards allocate more than a third of our total budget for these two categories. In 2021, our total budget is \$280,000 – and we have allocated \$110,000 for domestic and international giving. If you submit a request, you will have to describe the mission of the organization, how you are involved, and you will have to request a specific amount of money – keeping in mind other requests as well.

Unlike some of the other Church of the Saviour communities, Seekers supports call and ministry in daily life – and that means we give to organizations that we have not started and do not control. But we do expect YOU to be aware of how that organization is operating – what its values are, how efficiently it uses resources, and who benefits. They must be doing the work of Jesus in the world.

On a given Sunday in the next couple of months, everyone will be invited to stay after worship to participate in the discussion about how to apportion the \$60,000 designated for domestic giving or the \$50,000 designated for international giving.

Your particular level of giving to Seekers does not matter. As

a member of Seekers, you have a chance to share in deciding where and how our common funds will be spent.

Newer or smaller requests are usually honored – as an encouragement to participation. Among longer or larger commitments, there may be some bargaining: “I’ll lower my ask by \$1,000 if you will, and that will bring us within range of the total budget.” It’s an amazing process, and one that we might hope for in our national legislature. It’s an important aspect of encouraging servant leadership wherever you find yourself. THAT IS WHAT GIVES ME HOPE in this time of political upheaval.

The process of requesting funds, of describing your commitment and advocating for work you are already giving time and energy to, is really a way of claiming YOUR CALL and confirming your trust in God’s love for the world. That is a primary quality of servant leadership no matter where we are on the spiritual journey of reclaiming God’s Spirit in us.

I pray that, in this time of political and pandemic flux, ALL OF US will be listening for the call of John the Baptist to repentance, as a gateway to experiencing the Holy Spirit that continues to quicken the beloved community of Christ Jesus.

May it be so.

Amen.