

A Sermon Preached by the Reverend Carole Johannsen
St. Augustine's Episcopal Church
Croton-on-Hudson, New York
The Baptism of Our Lord (Year B) – January 8, 2006

We tell the story of Jesus' baptism every year on the Sunday after Epiphany, no matter what year of our three-year cycle we're in. It's a reminder to us - not that Jesus was first baptized before beginning his earthly ministry, but that *we* begin our lives as his followers by baptism. This is *our* story.

Baptism is about conversion. It was not new with John. It had long been part of the ritual of conversion among Jews, who called it *tevilah*. In Jewish tradition, one was cleansed of past life by the waters of *tevilah* to begin a new, fresh life as a Jew. John merely put a new spin on an old ritual. With him, baptism in the Jordan was not about converting to Judaism, but about converting to a more godly way of life. "Repent" was John's one-word sermon. Leave behind your sins, be washed clean and begin again. Even for the babies we baptize, baptism represents that kind of conversion, by the parents if not the baby: to commit the child to a life that is God-driven.

Jesus didn't need repentance; he was already on God's track. He presented himself to be baptized - and God responded to his baptism by proclaiming him "The Beloved Son" - so that we would have his model to follow as we become disciples. I'm willing to bet that no one here had a baptism as dramatic as Jesus', but your baptism and mine was no less important to God, as our beginning of a life of discipleship and vocation.

Vocation comes from the Latin word, *vocare*. It means "to call" as when God calls us to service. Let me say a few words about what *vocation* is and is *not*. It is *not*, or at least not necessarily, *career*. The word "career" comes from the Latin word *carrera*, which means - believe it or not! - "racetrack." It is the same Latin word from which we get the word "car," which suggests that "career" and "car" may have some root similarities. A "car" on a "racetrack" goes around in circles, competing with other cars going around in circles, each of them driven by a lone driver. For the winner, there is status and financial gain at the end, but most drivers in a race do not win. They simply continue driving alone, around in circles, eventually losing the race.

From *carrera* we get the word "career," and we know that too often, careers are competitive and lonely, and while there is usually financial gain, there is also a lot of driving around in circles.

Now compare *carrera* with *vocare*. In baptism, God beckons us to *vocation*. God *calls* us to use our gifts and the skills we develop to God's purpose, as disciples of Jesus Christ. When we do so, even our *careers* are *vocation*; when we do not do so, then our careers are no more than *carrera* - a racetrack.

People choose their career for various reasons: to earn a living, maybe a very lucrative living; to do what you're good at, as someone who plays piano well might choose a career as a performer or a music teacher. Some people just fall into a career by taking over a family business, or becoming a farmer because you've grown up in farm country. However we get there, however we choose the particulars of our career, sometimes our careers become our "racetracks" and we spend a lifetime going around in professional circles.

The substantial difference between "career" and "vocation" is that in vocation, we are responding not to what we choose to do, or feel we should do, but to what God calls us to do. If we are especially blessed, our "vocation" is also our "career."

Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and writer, tells the story of her own search for vocation. At midnight one night she asked God to tell her as plainly as possible what she was supposed to do.

"Anything that pleases you," was the answer that came into her sleepy head.

"What?" she said, waking up. "What kind of an answer is that?"

"Do anything that pleases you," the voice in her head said again, "(but) belong to me."

(The Preaching Life, 23)

That is the simple truth of vocation for all of us. When God calls us, it is not to do something more than what we're already doing, but to do it *differently*. Vocation means doing all that we do for God's glory and to further God's purpose for the world. Following Christ, and in the name of Christ, we are invited to "do whatever we like," as long as we "belong" to God as we do it.

God's call does not come once in a lifetime. It comes first at baptism, and then every time we listen throughout our lives. God may call us in and out of relationship, in and out of service, in and out of careers, but as long as we commit ourselves to serving God in all that we do, we are living out our vocation. And the additional, guaranteed good news is that we are happiest when we are living into the fullness of God's will for us.

It used to be that "vocation" was a word only used by priests and nuns to refer to their life work. In Martin Luther's day, 500-plus years ago, the clergy claimed a special relationship with God that presumed their vocation was superior to all others. They had taken over all the holy functions of the Church, leaving the laity with not much more to do in Church than kneel and watch the events at the altar. It infuriated Luther, who was a priest himself but did not believe himself superior to anyone else. Never one to mince words, Luther attacked this clerical arrogance in his sermons and in the infamous 95 Theses he posted on the church door in Wittenburg. He stated plainly that *every* Christian has a vocation and an office, and not one is more dear to the heart of God than any other.

In our offices, he said, we exercise the diversity of our gifts, thereby participating in the on-going life of the world. We have both these individual *offices* in the world, and our mutual *vocation* to serve God through them.

"Only look at your tools," he wrote, "your needle, your thimble, your beer barrel, your articles of trade, your scales, your measures, and you will find this saying written on them. You will not be able to look anywhere where it does not strike your eyes. None of the things with which you deal daily are too trifling to tell you this incessantly, if you are but willing to hear it; . . . 'My dear, use me toward your neighbor as you would want him to act toward you with that which is his.'" (from *Luther on Vocation*, Gustaf Wingren)

Thus, in our day, the physician may serve God in her practice of medicine; the gardener in his planting and nurturing of seeds. The computer programmer may do God's work at his keyboard and screen by furthering human communication; the storekeeper by honest and helpful commerce. A mother, a grandfather, a husband or wife, serves God by loving attentiveness to children and spouses. It is all vocation. It *begins* in baptism, where it is nurtured in the Church as we learn who we are and *whose* we are. But vocation is *exercised* primarily in the world where we are called to do God's work.

In a minute, I will ask you to renew your Baptismal Vows in place of the Nicene Creed. These Vows ask two things of us: first, that we affirm our belief in God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and secondly, that we accept our vocation as the ones who have followed Christ into the waters of baptism. We are to worship and study our faith; we are to resist evil and when necessary, seek forgiveness; we are to spread the Good News of Christ, to love all people, and to strive for justice and peace in the world. These mandates of our Covenant should not be separate from the rest of our lives; they are, rather, the *attitudes* of our vocation.

To each of these elements of Covenant, we respond: "I will, with God's help," because the grace given first in baptism, is given again and again, without end, to sustain us in our vocation. God passionately wants to participate in every facet of our lives. And for us, it is only in that co-creativity with God that we find the true peace that passes all understanding. AMEN.

Readings (Epiphany IB): Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 89:20-29; Acts 10:34-38; Mark 1:7-11.