

## It's Our Call

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There are many mysteries in Jesus' journey, but the Gospel story Deborah just shared is the mystery I've had the most trouble understanding - why did Jesus go to the Jordan River that day to be baptized by John?

I did a little research - which I tend to do when I don't understand something - and I learned a few historical facts that might have been part of the reason Jesus went to be baptized. I learned that baptism – the act of immersion in water – was part of the Jewish tradition. I remember reading about the need for ritual cleansing after touching ritually unclean things, but I didn't realize that it was required before entering God's presence and offering any sacrifice. And if you think about it, Jesus would be offering a greater sacrifice than anyone ever had, so it makes some sense that He would follow the rules of cleanliness handed down over the generations.

However, I also learned that the baptism John was offering was different. Answering God's call on *his* life, John didn't offer a ritual cleansing; it was much more. John spoke about the need for repentance, to turn away from sin and turn back to God. John offered a baptism of forgiveness - a spiritual cleansing. Interesting information, but that still left me with the question of why Jesus would need to be baptized by John that day.

As I sat with that information, I had one of those 'aha' moments. God knows all about us - our human tendencies... our doubts and our questions... that we're hard to convince... God understood, that even before Jesus' public ministry began, humans would want a visible sign of God's blessing of Jesus and what He was about to undertake. So, God provided the people there that day - and all of us down through the years – visible proof of God's blessing. This was the official start of Jesus' public ministry - not that He wouldn't have been following His call at home, among friends and family before this, but now Jesus would be fully in the public eye.

So the idea of a public baptism as a ritual cleansing, makes sense. But why would Jesus - God made flesh! – need a spiritual cleansing. And that got me thinking about that flesh part – you know, the human side of Jesus. His home life growing up, the time He spent with His parents and siblings - the Bible doesn't really tell us much about those years. And what about the time Jesus spent learning Joseph's trade as a craftsman. How had Jesus felt standing by his earthly father's side in that workshop? This is a part of Jesus' life that we don't really talk about that much. But for me at least, it's an important aspect as we think about Jesus and the beginning of His time in the public eye. What was Jesus' mindset in the days leading up to His baptism? Was it wholly the God perspective... or did the human side come into play?

How do *you* imagine Jesus must have felt that day, looking around the workshop, the house, the town where He had grown up? Do you think Jesus struggled with the huge step He needed to take? Jesus knew He had a vital part to play in God's plan, but He also knew what that entailed. Knowing what God had called Him to, do you think He hesitated? Thought about ignoring God's plan? I know I certainly would have... What about you? Have you ever thought about that? We know Jesus came to earth so that He could fully understand what life is like for us, but how often do we consider what everyday life was like for Jesus? Especially in the days leading up to His baptism and the start of His public ministry?

I recently started reading Bishop Michael Curry's book Love is the Way. One of the lines that really jumped out at me gave me a perspective on what might have played into Jesus' decision that day. Bishop Curry said, "Love is the firm commitment to act for the well-being of someone other than yourself."<sup>1</sup> (p27) A powerful concept on its own, but when I applied it to my image of Jesus standing in the workshop that day, it became a poignant reminder of what He faced. The baby Jesus was born into that kind of love as Mary and Joseph had shown. The child Jesus grew up with that concept of love from God. The adult Jesus had to step out of the workshop if He was going to live into that "firm commitment".

I imagine that threshold represented a lot more than a simple doorway that day. On one side, the comfort and safety of the life Jesus knew. Staying could have been a reasonable alternative. We don't know for sure, but many scholars believe Joseph had died by this point, so Jesus might realistically have been expected to care for His mother. It would certainly have been a convenient excuse. If it was one of us, we might have said "Ooo, sorry God, not today – my mother needs me. But when things are a bit more settled, I'll get back to You!"

Bishop Curry went on to say, "If love looks outward, to the good of the other, then its opposite isn't hate, it's selfishness..."<sup>1</sup> (p33) We know now that Jesus was the absolute opposite of selfishness. He willingly took on the sins of the world; for those alive at that time, for the generations that followed, for you and me, and for all the generations that will come after us. If we're honest, I think we all have times being a bit selfish, of ignoring God's call on our life. How many times have we felt that nudge - to call someone, to reach out, to speak up, to take a stand – and ignored it? How many times have we said: "I'm tired" or "I'm busy" or "I can't do anything that will make a difference"?

If we feel that way about the small things we're asked - compared to the things Jesus knew faced Him – would you blame Him for hesitating? I certainly wouldn't. In those days, Jesus was known as Mary and Joseph's son, a craftsman like His father, a man from small town Nazareth. And that day He had a decision to make – a decision that had the potential to change the world. With His decision looming, I wonder what Jesus said to God that day in the workshop. Even though there are no verses that say Jesus prayed that particular day, there are many references to the times Jesus did step aside to pray. With such a weighty issue, I'm sure Jesus spent time with God that day. What do you think Jesus might have said? Do you think He might have complained about the people He would have to deal with? The challenges He would be facing? He knew He would be dealing with people that had turned from God... people that thought they could legislate behavior so that they would be the ones to determine who was right and who was wrong... people who had a lot invested in protecting the status quo. But Jesus also knew there were more people that were struggling with that status quo, people that didn't understand what was happening and didn't know where to turn. Matthew 9:36 says of Jesus, "And what pity He felt for the crowds that came, because their problems were so great and they didn't know what to do or where to go for help. They were like sheep without a shepherd." Do you think He talked to God about those people too? I do.

Jesus knew what was on the other side of that threshold. On the other side was His destiny, literally what He was born to do. Jesus knew why He was there, knew what he needed to do. Yet, He could have turned His back on His destiny, could have ignored God's call on His life. We know in the Garden of Gethsemane that Jesus prayed and asked God to change the future that awaited Him. Not once, not twice but three times. Yet each time, Jesus concluded, "Not My will, but Yours."

No matter what went into the process the day of His baptism, Jesus - understanding that He had a vital part in God's plan – made His decision and stepped over that threshold into a new beginning.

I can understand why Jesus might have struggled with taking that step. And because of that, now I can understand why the human side may have felt He needed that baptism of forgiveness. In Acts 19 Paul talks about baptism. In verse 4a it says, *Paul explained, "John baptized with a baptism by which people showed they were changing their hearts and lives..."* I can't think of anyone whose baptism changed their life more than Jesus. That day, as He stepped over that threshold, He gave up the shelter of anonymity. He might have gone into the water as just another man from Nazareth, but He came up out of it a changed man; not just recognized by God, but blessed by God in a most public way.

That one step across the threshold could have been one of the hardest steps Jesus had to take. But putting aside hesitancy and fear, Jesus accepted His part in God's plan. He stepped out of that workshop and away from what He had known. Once over that threshold, the die was cast. When He stepped into the water of the Jordan River that day it was a sign of His acceptance of God's call. Stepping out of the water, with God's blessing ringing in His ears, Jesus embraced His mission to transform the world.

And God is waiting to bless us as well. Bishop Curry encourages us to recognize God's call. He says "...the love I am asking you to discover inside yourself, or reconnect to, is something fierce. This love is a verb! It is an action, with force and follow through... Love as an action is the only thing that has changed the world for the better."<sup>1</sup> (p34) That's the kind of love Jesus showed us that day, and every day of His ministry. The kind of love we are called to. A fierce love that didn't hesitate – didn't hesitate to show compassion ... didn't hesitate to teach... didn't hesitate to touch ... didn't hesitate to trust... didn't hesitate to heal... didn't hesitate to accept all He came in contact with. But there was also follow through. Jesus didn't hesitate to call out unkindness, or unfaithfulness or hypocrisy. Jesus didn't let people hide behind the *word* of the law if their actions didn't reflect the *spirit* of the law.

And God has gifted us that kind of fierce love too. A love-that-acts is the gift we need to be able play our part – but it's our call whether we accept that gift. Just as Jesus had to accept God's call on His life, we have to accept God's call on our lives. Because, like Jesus, we are all vital to God's plan - we all have a part to play, whether we recognize that part or not. Sometimes our part may seem insignificant to us because we can't see the greater picture. Sometimes, the part may seem huge to us - requiring changes we didn't expect, or may be afraid to make. But we have been gifted the greatest example. Jesus walked this path... He faced challenges... He was afraid... and because of that, He understands...

Several years ago, feeling alone and facing a new call on my life, God gave me a poem to help me as I worked through that process. I'd like to share it with you:

Come Jesus says,  
follow me,  
I have walked this way.  
I have cleared this path.  
I will help you find the way.  
I'll guide you, as you go.

Let us take this journey,  
that we may grow,  
closer and stronger,  
together along the way.

I too had a threshold God was calling me to step across. I'm glad to say that I did step across that threshold, grateful that Jesus accepted His call that day in the workshop, and comforted that He understands my hesitancy and willingly walks the path with me. I have not yet fully immersed myself in my personal Jordan River, but I have progressed from dipping my toes to actually wading. 😊

No matter the size of our part, no matter what our call is, each opportunity presents us with a threshold to cross, a new beginning. I like how Henri Nouwen puts it in his book You Are Beloved<sup>2</sup>. He says "We must learn to live each new day, each hour, yes each minute as a new beginning, as a unique opportunity to make everything new... Imagine that we could walk through the new year always listening to The Voice saying to us "I have a gift for you and I can't wait for you to see it! Imagine!"

Yes! Imagine. God not only has a gift for each of us, but God can't wait for us to see it! That gift is a fierce love that calls us to action, that calls us to the part God needs us to play, whether large or small. And each time, we must decide if we will accept God's gift - the gift of a love that gives us the chance to take that stand... to write that note... to make that donation... to grow closer to our Savior... That chance to make our world a better place. It's our call.

I'd like to leave you with one last quote from Bishop Curry's book. A reassurance and a challenge... "I have faith in God. I also have faith in us. We can get this right. The world has changed before, and it can change again, for the better. And we can find peace and joy in our hearts in the interim, even as we carry on the struggle for a humane, just and peaceful world ruled by love."<sup>1</sup> (p23) Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Love is the Way Bishop Michael Curry, Avery, NY, NY, 2020

<sup>2</sup> You Are Beloved Henri J M Nouwen, Convergent Books, Colorado Springs, CO, 2017