

**Epiphany 1 – Year A**  
**13 January 2008**  
**Saint Anne’s Episcopal Church**  
**Lee’s Summit, Missouri**

**Matthew 3: 13-17**

*Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in them the fire of your love. AMEN.*

A little more than a year ago at this time, I had just completed what seminarians affectionately refer to as GOEs – the General Ordination Examinations. The GOEs are a set of exams, given by the national Episcopal Church, in seven areas – things like scripture, church history, theology, and ethics – that most dioceses require candidates for ordination to take prior to ordaining them as priests.

As you can imagine, the GOEs loom large for seminarians who face them. And the time leading up to them can be, shall we say, a little bit anxious. Okay, to be honest, it can be terrifying.

Everything you’ve worked for and studied for in the three years in seminary – all wrapped up in your answers to seven questions, written over the course of three and a half days.

In the days before taking the GOEs, I was meeting with my spiritual director and discussing my extreme anxiety about the exams. What if I don’t do well? And, if I don’t do well, can I ever be a “good priest”? Maybe they will even decide that I shouldn’t be ordained. Okay, maybe I wasn’t really called to be a priest at all.

As my anxiety grew and my words more and more evidenced my distress, he calmly and wisely looked right at me and asked this question.

“Cindy, where does the authority for your call come from?”

After being taken aback for a moment, I replied, “It comes from my baptism.”

“That’s right; it doesn’t come from seven questions or even how you answer those questions. So, why don’t you place a bowl of water on the table where you are working on the exams? Just to remind you of where the authority for your call actually comes from and to keep those exams in proper perspective.”

Now I must admit I didn’t literally place a bowl of water on my work-table as I wrote my answers to the GOEs, but I did keep that water, the water of baptism, with me figuratively through those three and a half days of exams and in the days and months since then – even to this day.

This morning, we have read Matthew’s account of Jesus’ first adult act – his baptism by John the Baptist. One writer has called this Jesus’ first miracle – the miracle of his humility.

It was a miracle that told us what we could expect from Jesus, because the first thing Jesus did for human beings was to go down with them into the deep waters of repentance and baptism. And, Jesus’ whole life would be like this. From the beginning of his earthly ministry until the end, Jesus showed us that he was truly God with us.

As we think today about Jesus’ baptism in the River Jordan, I’d like for us to think a few minutes about the meaning of our baptisms.

For each of us, baptism is what sets us apart as Christians. It is the source of the “call” that each of us has received, the source of our vocation, if you will.

For those of us who are Christians, our “vocation” is to be participants with God in God’s work in the world. We may do different things in our daily lives – teacher, attorney, physician, store clerk, clergy person, homemaker, secretary, carpenter, volunteer – but we, as Christians, all hold our vocation in common. Whatever we do in our individual work, however we exercise the diversity of our God-given gifts and talents, our mutual vocation is to serve God through our work. In this way, we are uniquely the same.

This is the ancient, and I think biblical, vision of the church as a priestly people – the priesthood of all believers. The church - set apart for ministry in baptism, confirmed and strengthened in worship, and made manifest in service to the world.

But, if we are honest, I think the idea of affirming the ministry of every baptized Christian may not be particularly appealing to everyone. Saying that every baptized Christian is called to ministry and has a vocation that makes them a participant in God’s work in the world is not what everyone wants to hear.

Because, you see, it can sound like just more work, more responsibility. And, frankly, most people in our culture today already have all the work and all the responsibility they can handle. Maybe even more than they can handle.

One priest told a story about preaching a sermon on the ministry of all the baptized as God’s best hope for the world. Following the sermon, she was approached by a woman in the congregation who said, “I’m sorry, but I don’t want to be that important.”

Like many other Christians, this woman may have heard the preacher’s invitation to ministry as an invitation to do more – to lead the stewardship campaign, to teach Sunday School, to work in a

homeless shelter. Or maybe she heard the invitation to ministry as an invitation to be more than she already was – to be more generous, to be more loving, to be more “religious.”

Now, I am the last person on earth to tell you that if you take your call in baptism seriously that you won't have to do or to be something more, or to do or to be something different. My own experience would tell me that when you take your baptismal call seriously, when you take your vocation to participate with God in God's work in the world seriously, that you may have to do something or be something more or different. And, it may be something that you frankly would not of your own volition choose to do or to be.

But, I also know that a person's ministry may involve simply doing or being what a person is already doing or being, but with one difference. Namely, that we understand that whatever we do or whatever we are, we are called to be God's person in and for the world. Whether a teacher or an attorney or a homemaker or a carpenter, we do God's work and we speak God's word in the world.

To be honest, all of this can be a little frightening. And, perhaps it should be a little frightening. For if we take God's call in baptism seriously, we may have to change what we do or who we are and we will certainly have to change how we see the world and our actions in the world.

And, let's face it, doing God's work in the world usually draws fire. The Savior we follow was hung on a cross because he was so dangerous, so threatening to the world.

Wherever our baptismal call leads each of us, we must always remember that we are ordained by God at baptism to share Christ's ministry in the world. We are a body of people united by that

one common vocation, which we each pursue in different ways using the gifts and talents that God has given us.

And, as Jesus was empowered at his baptism by God to carry out God's purposes in the world, we too, in our baptisms, are empowered by God to follow the call of baptism wherever it may lead us.

I recently read that to believe in one's own priesthood, to take the call of baptism seriously, is to see the extraordinary dimensions of an ordinary life, to see the hand of God at work in the world and to see one's own hands as necessary to that work – whether the work is caring for a child, preaching a sermon, building a house, teaching a classroom full of children, volunteering at a food pantry, or working with a client.

Our hands are God's hands, claimed by God at baptism, for the accomplishment of God's work on earth.

During this season of Epiphany, we see the manifestation of Christ to the peoples of the earth. Jesus' baptism was one of those events that showed us who Jesus really was. And, I believe that our baptisms show us who we really are – children of God, marked as Christ's own forever, God's people in and for the world.

Now some people will no doubt say “no” to the invitation of baptism, the invitation to participate in God's work in the world, because they find it too fearsome or too intrusive. But those who say “yes” to the invitation, who take the call of baptism seriously, those who consent to carry out God's purposes in the world – they will receive the empowering spirit of God and hear the voice of God speaking.

**This is my son, my daughter, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.**

**You are chosen and marked by my love, precious to me, the delight of my life.**

One of the things I love about this place where we worship is the font. The water that I see each time I walk by it, the sound of the flowing water that provides the background for all we do here. For me, it has become that “bowl of water” that my spiritual director talked about. Listen to the quiet sound it makes. The next time you walk by it, touch the water, enjoy its feel and its sound, and maybe even splash it just a little bit. And know that God says to each of us,

**You are my son, my daughter, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. You are chosen and marked by my love, precious to me, the delight of my life.**

**AMEN.**