

Reflection on the Word: January 14, 2018

1 Samuel 3:1-10; Mark 1:4-11

What is it that keeps you awake at night? Is it anxious thoughts about your workload, or whether your bank account will have sufficient funds to pay the month's bills? Is it a nagging sense of having done wrong ... by neglecting another person's needs, by having hurt another by your words or actions? Is it a sense that there is something more you should be doing in life ... something that gives meaning or that enables you to make a difference in the community, the church, the world?

Have you ever thought that in all of these things, God may be speaking to you. But you sometimes cannot hear? God may be saying, don't worry; take one day at a time; trust that I am with you and that your needs will be provided for. God may be offering a word of forgiveness and the insight that helps you to make peace with yourself and with one you have hurt. God may be calling you, as he did Samuel, and all you need is a mentor, like Eli, to help you discern what that call is all about; to help you determine the new thing, the opportunity, or possibility that God is inviting you into.

Discerning God's call is part of our day to day journey in life... and as Christians, it is part of what it means to live out our baptism.

Baptism is a powerful symbol for the Christian, more powerful than many church people are aware. There is an Old Testament scholar and author named Walter Brueggemann who is influencing how many Christians are thinking about baptism today. And though I do not want to get deep into his theology, I would like to share a few thoughts to give you a taste of what he is saying to the church.

Brueggemann begins by saying that everybody has a script. You and I have a script that we live by. Think of a script from which an actor reads. Each of us, says Brueggemann, has a script in his or her brain and we live our lives both consciously and unconsciously guided by that script. This script is the product of a lifetime of influences. Part of this script comes from the rituals in which our families engage. For some of us this may be as simple as, "My dad always said . . ." Writer James P. Lenfesty tells about an eleven-year-old boy fishing one night with his father. Suddenly the boy's pole doubled over. He knew something huge was on the other end. His father watched proudly as, with much effort, the boy reeled it in. It was the largest bass he had ever seen. But then his dad looked at his watch. It was 10:00 p.m. two hours before the bass season opened. Shaking his head, his dad said, "You'll have to put it back son." The boy couldn't believe what his father was saying. No one was around. No one would know. Why should he throw it back in? That was thirty-four years ago. Today, the boy is a successful architect in New York City. He still lives by the ethic of honesty his father taught him that night. That is part of his script. So ... part of our life's script comes from our family.

Another part of the script comes from our surrounding culture, especially television and advertising. A recent study has shown that the average American is exposed to between 500 and 1,000 commercial messages a day. Also, much of the advertising we see and hear places greater importance on extrinsic values, which are associated with higher levels of prejudice, less concern about the environment... and weakening concern about human rights.

Brueggemann says that central to our cultural script, is the assumption that happiness comes in a bottle or in a product or in a service. According to this script, "there is a product or a treatment or a process to counteract every ache and pain and discomfort and trouble, so that life may be lived without inconvenience." But that script has failed, he goes on to say. We may live better than any previous generation on earth, and yet never have we been unhappier and more uncertain about our future. The script has failed. Never have we been more disconnected from the things that really matter.

And so this brings us to the next thesis of Brueggemann's: our physical, mental, moral and spiritual health depends on disengaging from and relinquishing the failed script. That makes sense, doesn't it? If the script has failed us, we need to disengage ourselves from it. Easier said than done. How do we undo a lifetime of programming from our family, from our society, from all the myriad influences that have been brought to bear on us. That, says Brueggemann, is the task of the church and its ministry ... not to entertain, not to keep us comfortable in traditional ways of thinking or doing that no longer work, but to give us an alternative script that is rooted in the Bible and enacted through the tradition of the church.

And the entry point into this counterscript for our lives, according to Brueggemann, is baptism. Baptism is sign and seal that we desire a new script for our lives, a script written by Christ himself. Baptism, Brueggemann says, is a "bold counteract." In baptism we claim a new set of values. This is so important. The purpose of baptism is to set us free from the script that has failed us. Having this new script in hand offers us new possibilities.

Commenting on the new possibilities baptism gives us, one pastor writes, "So if someone tempts you, 'Why don't you cheat just this once?' You can say, 'Oh, I couldn't possibly.' 'Why not?' they wonder. 'Baptized!' you say. 'Ohhh . . .'

"You may feel like giving up on God and religion, like no one cares about you and nothing really makes any difference anyway. 'Why do you keep dragging yourself to that church,' someone may ask you. 'Baptized!' you reply.

"Even within the church, some of us have a tendency to be dismissive of people who are a little slower or needy or obnoxious than we'd like them to be. We have a tendency to create in-crowds and out-crowds, those who get care and attention and those allowed to slip slowly out of the circle. We have a tendency to do these things, but of course we should not. Why not? Baptized!"

This is baptism as it was meant to be.

Our baptism is a mark of identity – in which God and the church declares. “You are my beloved. You are a much loved child of God.”

Baptism is a mark of belonging; it welcomes us into the community of the Christian church worldwide, and places us in the midst of a congregation, a family of faith locally, where hopefully we will be nurtured, cared for, and helped to grow in our own faith and witness.

Baptism marks a beginning - it is the beginning of a journey that continues right up until death, a journey in which we will continually discover who God is and who we are in relation to the God who loves us unconditionally. It is a journey of discerning who God is calling us to be and what God desires us to do.

And baptism is a commissioning. It is a sending forth to participate in the ministry which is both Christ’s and ours. It is a call to discipleship in which we find expression of our faith through acts of ministry and service ... both inside and outside of the formal structures of the church.

Many of us need to ask the question whether our baptism means anything in our lives. It should be a powerful force in making choices both large and small. It should be a powerful force in reminding us who we are and to Whom we belong. It is said that when Martin Luther was despairing, and seemed to be overwhelmed with the challenges he faced, he would write with his finger in Latin in the dust on a table, “Baptizatus sum,” or “I have been baptized.”

Once we know who we are, we will know what we should do. And what we should do is this - seek to live the Jesus life. A life characterized by love and patience, acceptance and forgiveness, courage and compassion. In short - a life lived in obedience to God.
Amen.