

3 In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 2 “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” 3 This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.’ ”

4 Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him, 6 and they were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.

7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance, 9 and do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 10 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

11 “I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” 15 But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. 16 And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God’s Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from the heavens said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” **-Updated New Revised Standard Version**

Many years ago I read, with great interest, Lauren Winner’s memoir, “Girl Meets God”, a candid exploration of her spiritual journey first to Orthodox Judaism and then to Christianity. She organizes her memoir according to liturgical seasons, that is worship seasons, the seasons of the Jewish or Christian year, beginning with the Jewish season of Sukkot in which she tells of her conversion to Judaism, and then moving into Advent, the first season of the Christian year, and proceeding through the Christian seasons from that point on as she narrates her unfolding life as a Christian. One section of her book is titled “Epiphany.” That is the season in which we find ourselves now. We exited Christmas, that delightful 12 day season, on Friday, January 6th.

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The Christmas decorations came down, and here we now stand at the beginning of a new season.

Typically the first Sunday of Epiphany offers us a remembrance of Jesus' baptism and many churches choose to engage in a renewal of baptismal vows that Sunday. We are not doing so today. We remembered and celebrated baptism with a baptism and the welcoming of new members on the third Sunday of December and we will do so again on the fourth Sunday of January in our confirmation service. Lauren Winner, author of that memoir I mentioned, says the practice of renewing vows is hard for her. She was baptized only recently and she remembers clearly what she pledged at her baptism and she knows how badly she's done at keeping her pledges and doesn't know if she ought to dare to make them again. Many people feel such insecurity. I have heard it expressed repeatedly throughout 20 years of ministry.

Lauren Winner, like many of us, feels woefully inadequate when it comes to being truly faithful to Christ. She reflects on the struggles that some have, surely many in our own city among them, with the concept of infant baptism. Churches that only practice adult baptism cite the fact that babies are never baptized in scripture, John and Jesus were adults at the time of their baptisms, and they will often make the case that babies can't promise to do everything that one promises to do in a baptism. My friend, Joshua, now a Mennonite pastor makes this case all the time- he bemoans the fact that he was baptized at the age of 19, he was far too young to make that commitment, in his mind. Lauren says that she has never found this argument about babies being unable to make and keep promises very convincing, and I agree with her. She says "It strikes me as too individualistic. The very point is that no baptismal candidate, even an adult, can promise to do those things all by himself. The community is promising for you, with you, on your behalf. It is for that reason that I love to see a baby baptized. When a baby is baptized, we cannot labor under the atomizing illusion that individuals in Christ can or should go this road alone. When a baby is baptized we are struck unavoidably with the fact that this is a community covenant, a community relationship, that these are communal promises."

Lauren reflects on her own baptism and her near panic in preparation for the sacrament. She declared to her priest "This is ridiculous. I can't promise these things. Half the time I don't

trust God one iota. I can't stand up there and promise that I will trust Him forever and ever. Who on earth makes these promises?" It's as if Lauren was saying, "Who? Me?" with all the incredulity of one who is showered with grace without any logical explanation available.

John the Baptist, on that day Jesus showed up at the Jordan, was just as quick to say "Who? Me?" He'd been preaching for months about one who was to come, one who would have a much more powerful baptism to offer, one who would make all things right, one who would bring God's justice and God's love. And then, one day, that one showed up. And John knew it was him, the way you know deep down in your gut when you are in the presence of the Holy. I imagine Jesus humbly waited in line and then stood, head bowed, before John. I see John staggering. I hear John stammering, "Whoa, uh, wait a minute. Uh, I, I need to be baptized by YOU, and do, do, do YOU come to ME?" Jesus answers calmly, I imagine his head is still bowed, awaiting the waters upon it, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." And so John consented, I'm sure his hands were shaking as he lowered Jesus into the water, I'm sure his voice was wobbly, I'm sure his mind was blown when he saw the heavens open and saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove; I wonder if he fell into the water when he heard that voice "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." John had just held God's beloved Son in his hands, he had just bathed God's Son in the waters of repentance. He knew he had a mission, a mission from God, to get the world ready for the coming of the Messiah, but this, this was more than he ever imagined he would do. I wonder how many times he said, as he looked towards the sky, "Who? Me?"

Often at moments of commitment, baptism, confirmation, ordination, our knees knock, our hands shake, our voices crack, with "Who? Me?" This is what it is like to be called by God to serve Christ in this world, it is daunting, and intimidating, and it is rightly humbling. But Lauren Winner reminds us of something important; the answer to the question "Who? Me?" is actually, "No. Us." Presbyterians make this plain by vesting decision making in boards of elders, service in boards of deacons. All our ministry is carried out TOGETHER. Our mission is what? "Connecting with Christ and each other to serve our neighbors." This is a collective mission, it is not possible for any one individual to carry it out. Everyone here has been called to serve Christ and has been gifted for service; everyone here is unable to be fully faithful alone, to keep

all the promises of baptism alone; everyone here, needs everyone else, and everyone here, ultimately needs the grace of God. “Who? Me?” “No. Us.”

Lauren almost canceled her baptism for fear of failure at faithfulness but then her priest pulled off her shelf an order of baptism that has the same answer to every question posed, “I will, with God’s help.” This freed her to go forward. She recalls the baptism of infant twins at the chapel where she too was baptized. It was an evening service and there was a special dinner that followed the service for everyone who had attended. She writes, “There were, waiting to be cut, four or five sheet cakes, all gooey white icing on top and orange marmalade inside. A few of us students busied ourselves at cutting the cakes, so that when the time came for dessert, there were two hundred square pieces neatly laid out on small blue plates. It was tedious work. It was also, I thought, the most important thing I had done all month, cut cakes for those babies’ baptisms. More important than any history I had studied, or any magazine articles I had written, or any prayers I had prayed. It was the drudge work of the church, and it seemed the best work in the world. Like sweeping the church, or setting out the hymnals or making sure the sacristy held enough candles for the week’s vesper services. The holy work of God’s people, somehow. I told my priest, Jo, that I wanted to spend my whole life cutting cakes to celebrate babies’ baptisms.”

May each of you find such joy in serving Christ in ways small and large, cutting cake, serving on committees and boards, feeding the hungry, gathering funds for the destitute, whatever it is that God calls you to do, and always remember that when you find yourself asking, “Who? Me?” The answer is always “No. Us.”

Resource in addition to scripture cited in the writing of this sermon:

Winner, Lauren F. 2002. *Girl Meets God: A Memoir*. New York: Random House.