
What am I Going to Do with my Life?

Matthew 3.13-17

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on January 13, 2008 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

When I was at middle school I had a close friend who used to run out onto the grass, hurl herself down and look up to heaven, shake her fists and kick her heels into the ground, almost as if she were having a seizure, and say, “What am I going to do with my *life*?” At the time I thought it was quite funny. Now I look back with a good deal more compassion. I think she had quite understandably picked up the idea that school was supposed to give her the tools she needed to get life under control. But she already knew that her life was out of control. She already knew that she didn’t have the brains to talk or think her way to success, she didn’t have the looks or athletic ability to charm or float her way through life, and she didn’t have the family money or stability to buy her way out of trouble or wait for someone to rescue her. Her life was out of her control, and at the age of 13 she already knew it.

I now believe that the difference between her and most of the other people I have met in my life is that she had the courage to say it – or in her case, shout it. It’s sometimes said that most people live lives of quiet desperation [H.D. Thoreau, *Walden*]. I find this to be as true at Duke University as anywhere else. Unlike my childhood friend, many people in this community *are* well endowed with brains, looks, money or athletic ability – or even, all four. But a great many nonetheless live lives of quiet desperation. Many among us may not shake fists and bang heels and shout, but nonetheless feel that life is out of control. Maybe you are one of them. If so, I think today’s gospel may be for you.

Matthew describes how Jesus came to be baptized. We have already been told that locust-eating John was baptizing at the Jordan. Now the Jordan isn’t any old river. The Jordan is where Joshua brought the children of Israel into the Promised Land. The Jordan is where Israel left the misery of slavery and the wilderness of doubt and sin behind and entered the glorious liberty of the children of God. The River Jordan was, in other words, the place where Israel itself had been baptized, around 1500 years before John the Baptist was born. And here is John, saying, it’s time Israel was baptized again, because Israel is in a bad way. The Romans represent Israel’s slavery and the Pharisees and Sadducees in different ways represent Israel’s sin. And John is a voice crying in the wilderness – that’s the same wilderness, remember, where Israel was before she came into a land of her own.

And Jesus chooses this moment to begin his ministry. Like Israel, he’s been down in Egypt. Like Israel, he enters his inheritance at the River Jordan. John says to Jesus, “Hold your horses, you aren’t the oppressive Romans and you aren’t the failed Jewish leadership: why are you coming to be baptized?” And Jesus replies, “No, I’m not here because I need to be saved from sin or released from slavery. I’m here because I’m Israel. I’m the one on whom the hope of Israel and the hope of the world rests. And if I’m going to be Israel, I have to do what Israel has to do. I have to be baptized. It’s not about ending something bad; it’s about beginning something wonderful.”

John quickly realizes he’s going to lose the argument, so he gets down to business. And stay tuned for what happens next because it’s a condensed version of everything God has in store for Jesus, everything God has in store for Israel, and everything God has in store for you and me. Let me read it to you again. “*Suddenly the heavens were opened to Jesus and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’*” These two sentences give us the whole shape of the biblical story, and tie together Jesus’ story with Israel’s story. Let me explain.

What does the picture of a dove coming over water make you think of? It’s Noah’s dove, of course. Remember Noah sent out the dove, and it came back empty-beaked. He sent out the dove again, and it came back with a twig, little knowing it would thus provide an image to be printed on T-shirts and Happy Holidays cards for eternity. Noah sent out the dove a third time, and the dove didn’t come back. That meant the waters had subsided. Then God sent the rainbow, to say he would never destroy the earth again. But that made a problem for God. The earth was still full of sin, but God had ruled out destroying it. As the Old Testament relates, God

tried a few ways of addressing the problem. But the appearance of the dove shows us that Jesus is God's ultimate answer to the problem. At Jesus' baptism, Noah's dove finally comes back. Salvation literally comes home to roost. And then, if we hadn't already, we realize that the story of Noah is a baptism story. God drowns sin in water, and the dove marks the beginning of the emergence of a new humanity out of the water. So we see that Jesus' baptism stands in relation to Matthew's gospel the way Noah stands in relation to the Old Testament. It's the creation of a new humanity.

And then we notice that Matthew tells us the dove is the Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit... over the surface of the water... . Make you think of anything? Genesis 1 verse 2 says the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters. So to mention a dove points us to Noah and to mention the spirit over the water tells us this is a new creation story. But if you were here in Chapel on the Sunday before Christmas you'll remember that when we looked at the virginal conception of Jesus we discovered that that was also a new creation story. Then as now the Holy Spirit hovered over and alighted on someone and then as now there was a new creation out of nothing. This isn't a coincidence. Matthew doesn't do coincidences. It's Matthew telling us that there were two beginnings to the Old Testament, the beginning in creation and the new beginning in the covenant with Noah. And just the same way there were two new beginnings in Jesus, the amazing birth and here, now, the enspirited baptism. And the same is true for our own lives: there are two beginnings, the birth from the womb of our mother and the rebirth in baptism from the womb of God.

And at this moment there is a voice from heaven and the voice says "This is my beloved son." Now, there's only one place in the whole of the Old Testament where these two words are used together. It's not in Isaiah, it's not in the Psalms, it's not in the Song of Songs. It's at the scariest place of all. The moment that sends shivers down the spine of the Old Testament. Genesis 22. The moment when God calls on Abraham to take Isaac to Mount Moriah to sacrifice him there. God says to Abraham "Take your son, *your beloved son*, and offer him as a burnt offering." As we know Abraham obeyed and was on the point of killing his son when God intervened and offered a ram instead. And Christians have long seen Jesus as that son but also as the lamb of God whose sacrifice saves us. And we get this foreshadowing of the cross at the moment of Jesus' baptism, in these words *beloved son*. God's words to Abraham, and now God's words to Jesus. We've already seen Jesus and John's obedience in going ahead with the baptism. Obedience was Abraham's great virtue. Now we see Abraham again in these words "beloved son."

Abraham. When I spoke about the two beginnings in the Old Testament I spoke too soon. There are in fact three beginnings. *Creation*, yes, *covenant* with Noah, yes, and then Abraham – the *call* of Abraham. Jesus' birth recalls creation. His baptism echoes Noah. And his call, his call to the cross hinted at in these words that follow his baptism, that call reminds us of Abraham – God's third new beginning.

And we already have a hint that Jesus' journey to the cross will not be in vain because we are told that heaven is open. Jesus' obedience to his call to be the new Israel leads to John's obedience, and then the heavens open, in anticipation of what Jesus achieves for us in his resurrection from the dead. Now we've all seen James Bond films, and we can all imagine some kind of automatic door opening above our heads operated by some evil genius who not only plans to kill 007 and rule the world but also wears black leather gloves and has a pathological fondness for technical gadgets. But I don't think heaven opening is like that. Heaven opening means that for a fleeting moment the distance between us and God is taken away and God is all in all. For a precious instant the earth is full of the grandeur of God and everything is bursting with God's promise and glory. Just for now heaven is open to earth and earth is open to heaven, just as it will be at the end of time.

And the climax of all this dazzling reconfiguration of the Old Testament in the person of Jesus at the moment of his baptism comes in the very last words. "I am overjoyed with him." This again is the fruit and result of Jesus' ministry, and it is anticipated here at its outset: God is overjoyed with us. Not because we are so fabulous in ourselves, with all our brains or looks or money or athletic prowess. But because whenever God looks on us he sees Jesus. And so he is overjoyed with us, because Jesus is humanity in perfect relationship with God. Imagine heaven opening and God saying, "I am overjoyed with you."

One of the saddest stories I ever heard was of a woman called Fiona. Her father was in the most elite battalion of the British army. Like my friend in middle school she was utterly bewildered, but, unlike my friend, she

knew why. She was angry. She was angry because she felt she could never be good enough for her father. Instead of going to college, she embarked on a walk. A long walk. The walk lasted 11 years. It took her much of the way around the world. Towards the end she was invited to talk to a group of third graders in a local class. She said, "You know sometimes when you're walking home from school you're cross and you just decide to take the longer route home." One of the children said "Eleven years is a very long route home." Fiona replied, "Yes. I was very cross. Very, very cross." Finally she took the boat back to England. She returned to a hero's welcome after a remarkable feat of physical and spiritual endurance. There was only one person she was longing to meet. Her father. Her father came to meet her on a hill in Cornwall. It'd been a long time. He handed her his military beret, symbol of his achievements in the army. And as she told the story, she wept, and said, "But I didn't deserve it."

Nothing, it seemed, could convince her that she was good enough for her father. And that shows us the wonder of these last words in the story of Jesus' baptism: "I am well pleased." God is overjoyed with us. Not because we're so wonderful but because Jesus is.

And this brings us to see how the baptism of Jesus tells us not just Israel's story, not just Jesus' story, but our own story. We may well shake our fists and kick our heels and shout "What am I going to do with my *life*?" We may well feel that the bits of life that matter are well out of control. But God made three new beginnings with Israel, and embodied those three new beginnings in Jesus at the moment of his baptism. And he makes those three new beginnings in us.

First of all God is our creator. God made you this way because he wanted one like you. In some ways you are like everyone else, like everything else – you are an earthly, contingent part of the created order. But there are things that you can be and do that others can't, because of your unique experience, your unique history, your unique shape of body, mind and spirit. And there is something in the world that only you can do, something that will remain undone until you appear to do it, something that God created you to do. You may not yet know what that unique thing is. The important thing is that when the moment comes, you're ready.

And second God makes a covenant with you. Just like he did with Noah. This is what baptism embodies. God could do it on his own, but his covenant means that he longs to do it with you. If creation means God is delighted with you, covenant means he expects something of you. The covenant is simply this. God has given everything to you, your life and his. He expects everything from you in return. Faith isn't a spectator sport – it's about participating in the way God makes a new beginning. Keeping the covenant isn't about getting everything right in such a way as it seems you could do it without God. Keeping the covenant means faithfully and honestly getting it wrong in such a way as makes room for God to clean up afterwards.

And finally God calls you. And if it's anything like God's call to Abraham, which it will be, it will at some stage feel very much like a call to walk with Jesus on the way to the cross. If creation makes you know you matter, and covenant helps you know God is with you, call means being taken from the place or people or habits or paths that you know and being taken to a new place or a new people or a new role or a new challenge. In the New Testament as soon as someone is baptized they get given a new job to do, and that job always takes them, sooner or later, literally or metaphorically, to the cross. Today before our eyes two new creations have taken place, two new covenants have been made, and, we pray, two new calls have been heard. And in Jesus' baptism we discover the way God calls us. God calls us with the words, "My beloved child." God calls us as the one who made us for a reason. And God calls us as the one who will never leave us alone.

Well may we ask the question, "What am I going to do with my life?" But the more interesting question is, "What is *God* going to do with your life?" God created you, and in baptism makes a covenant with you. Stay close to the way God communicates with you. Stay close to scripture, stay close to wise and truthful friends, stay close to the poor, stay close to beauty, stay close to worship, stay close to the cross. And be expecting a call.