

“Do You Come to Me?” / Matthew 3:13-17 / 12 January 2013

“Do you come to me?” John the Baptist hesitates. “You want me to baptize to you?” It doesn't seem right to John. But Jesus wants him to do it, so he does. Ah, but you know, Jesus is like that. He's always turning up in places where he's not expected and asking people to do things they really don't want to do. Hard things, things that you'd rather leave undone. Jesus is always showing up like that, assigning tasks that will reward you in ways you cannot imagine...if only you can push past your initial hesitation and do it anyway.

Aren't all worthwhile things scary at first? Think about the day when you took your firstborn home from the hospital, if you are a father or mother. You looked around at your house, looked around at your life, all the unsecured cupboards full of toxic chemicals just waiting for little fingers to pull off the caps, all the sharp-edged furniture just waiting for little heads bump, all the adjustments that would have to be made in order to accommodate this small newcomer, whose arrival changes everything! Perhaps on that same day, you looked around at the lingering vestiges of your care-free youth, the mountain bike, the skateboard, the deck of cards, the pack of cigarettes, and you thought, “Time to be the grownup now. This kid is going to look to me for everything. Food, shelter, love, a sense of safety, a model for living, a pattern for manhood or womanhood.” Perhaps you even looked into those tiny, trusting eyes and asked that baby the same question John the Baptist asked Jesus. “Do you come to me?” Are you sure you got the right address? You want me doing this job? Let me warn you: I still put my own shirts on backwards sometimes, and I failed my driver's license exam twice. I don't know if I'm ready to prepare a little person for this world. But if it's me that you come to, little one, then I promise that I'll do my very best. Yes, it was scary, but your call was to do it anyway. And aren't you glad you did?

Perhaps you spent years preparing for your ideal career. The college degrees, the post graduate degrees, the internships, kowtowing to all the right authorities in the field. And then at last they ushered you into that fluorescent-lit cubicle, showed you to a swivel chair, one that was ergonomically correct, gave you all the access codes, an email address, binders, and folders, and handbooks, a key to the employee washroom. You spent most of your adult life preparing for this moment, but when they dropped the first assignment on your desk, you wanted to ask, “Wait, you want me to do that? Do you come to me? Not a single course in law school prepared me to sit across the desk from an enraged client who's suing for damages. Not a thing in nurse's training prepared me for the sadness of losing my first patient. Not a thing in seminary prepared me to do a funeral for a suicide. But your calling was to get over your hesitation and do the task anyway. And now, all these years later, aren't you glad you did?

I was shocked and horrified the first time I was asked to preach, as you may know. And yet, something inside of me—perhaps the fear itself—told me that if I could do this, then I would never regret it...or only occasionally regret it. My calling in life, perhaps like yours, was discovered not as I pursued it but as I hesitated and tried to avoid it. History is littered with unwanted tasks that needed to be done. And happily, there have usually been people who have put aside their reluctance and done them anyway. We have all felt incapable of our callings from time to time. We have all stammered with John the Baptist, “Wait. You come to me for that job?” But callings don't go away. They keep on pestering, for our task is to pursue them despite our hesitancy or fears.

The baptism of Jesus was his first great courageous act, and the church has been apologizing for it ever since. After all, John preached a baptism of repentance, and why would Jesus need to repent? But there he stood in line with all the other penitents on the riverbank, waiting to be baptized. Jesus was truly repenting, for repentance means to change the way you live, and he was radically rethinking his life. Here he was, three long decades after the angels' song had faded from the skies over Bethlehem. The years had been quiet; he was unknown. He dealt in wooden things, yokes for oxen, plows for farmers, handles for rakes, and hoes, and axes. Jesus was a carpenter, and tradition has it that he didn't make nice things like end tables and armchairs. No, he made useful things like farming

implements. Life was simple, quiet. But there comes a day when the sorrows of the world ring loud in our ears. There comes a day when we know that we must get up and do something; we can no longer hide from our calling. All his peaceful living comes to an end if he steps down into the cloudy, coffee-colored water of our world. We know that John hesitated, but I wonder if Jesus hesitated, too. There on the banks of a muddy river, there on the verge of a whole new calling, a whole new and less comfortable way of life, a way that would lead eventually to a cross, did Jesus tarry? Did he cast a long backward glance at the quiet life of anonymity that he was about to leave behind? Did his pulse quicken with a sense of reluctance, even fear?

Step into the water, Jesus! Even you can't see where this river will take you! Even you cannot see the bottom of its unfathomable depths! Step into the water, Jesus! Let it bear you away from your carpenter's shop in the hills of Galilee, your easy days of obscurity. Step into the water, and let its chilly currents bear you to faraway Jerusalem, to the horrors of Calvary, and onward into the mists of history, clouds of glory, where half a world away, magnificent cathedrals will be built in your name. Get over your fear. Step into the water, Jesus. Your calling is to do it anyway. And so he did

And you! Perhaps you, too, tarry on the edge of a task (or even an identity) that you want very much to escape. But you cannot. Step into the water. We've all been hesitant to do the very thing we were created to do. We've all said, with John the Baptist, and perhaps even with Jesus, "You want me to do what? You come to me...with a job like that?" But do it anyway. It will make all the difference. Weren't we a little bit scared to get involved in our Haiti Water Projects? Weren't we hesitant to involve ourselves in Family Promise? Does anyone regret either of those decisions?

I had a friend who was a secret alcoholic. She knew she had to stop drinking. It was wrecking her life, but she invested all her energies into sneaking drinks, and she was terrified to change. She was one of those big, blustery people who rolls into a room like something you'd see on the Doppler radar, a true force of nature. She was coarse, and loud, and easily angered. She had defenses like a medieval castle, turrets, and ramparts, and a moat, a holy terror when she was drunk. She seemed hard and impenetrable. But in reality, she was sensitive, intuitive, and kind. Things like cruelty confused her and made her angry. That's not why she drank; she drank simply because she was an alcoholic. As much as she wanted to change, she put it off for many years because to stop drinking would be to find a whole new way to live, a whole new person to be, a whole new calling to pursue. And that's scary! So she drank until, at last, the pain of remaining the same began to exceed the pain of changing. When she stopped drinking, all her fears were realized. She was anxious and cut adrift for months. She didn't know who to be or how to act. But she made it past that initial period of disorientation, and in time she began to find joy in life that she never knew was there. Her calling was to put down the bottle. It scared her, but she did it anyway, and everyone is glad she did.

We've seen these wonders in our world, you and I! We've seen addicts who came clean and found new lives. We've seen sad, broken people who learned to throw their energies into things that mattered, and it transformed them into something new. We've seen people discover their calling in life, stepping into the deep waters of change, and coming out on the other side, well and whole. This is why "resurrection" is the defining story for our faith. We've seen the seeming impossible occur. But in all these cases, someone had to push past the fear that bid him tarry on the riverbanks and stay the same. Someone had to step into the chilly waters, the baptism of growth, discomfort, change.

St. Patrick went about Ireland in ancient times, baptizing the many tribal kings. Now, Patrick carried an ornate wooden staff with a crucifix on the top end and a sharp iron spike at the bottom end. That way, whenever he decided to preach in the open air, he would stab the thing into the ground and preach with the cross held high beside him. Patrick was no longer a young man when he baptized one King Aengus, and as he performed the rite, he leaned heavily on his staff and wondered why the young king was wincing. When the ritual was over, he looked down to see that the king's foot was bleeding profusely. Patrick had stabbed it with his iron-tipped staff. When the saint apologized, the king remarked, "Oh, I thought it was part of the ceremony." It's not that faith is supposed to hurt, but a

living faith will change us, and that can sometimes hurt.

Sometimes you hear people asking what God wants them to do in some situation or another. I think, to be honest, we usually know exactly what we are supposed to do; we just lack the courage or the resolve to do it. Instead of asking God to tell us what to do, it would be wiser to pray for strength to do the thing we know we must. But our calling sometimes scares us. We've all been hesitant to do the thing we know we must do. Some of the most moving, inspiring people in all of modern history have been the ones who were in the wrong place at the wrong time, but when life called upon them to make an important sacrifice, to give up old comforts and throw themselves into the fray of the world, they found it in themselves to cast aside personal privilege and do it. Martin Luther, the religious reformer, not to mention his namesake, the social reformer. Neither wanted fame or power, but their calling was to act, and aren't you glad they did? I honestly believe that our need to change can usually be measured by how much we fear making the change. Deep down, we know right well that we've got to do the painful work of reorganizing our life, reorganizing our society, building a life that reflects our principles. We've got to embrace lives of real generosity, responsibility, kindness, sobriety. And if we make all the excuses in the world to put off those changes, then those endless excuses in themselves are the tell-tale sign of just how distinctly we are being called away from our old, quiescent ways to the new thing that is in store for us.

"Do you come to me?" John the Baptist asks hesitantly when Jesus comes for baptism. Jesus is like that. He's always asking people to do things they don't want to do, things they know they should do, things they are being called to do. We've all wanted to run from our callings at times. But step into the water. It's chilly. It's deep. You can't see the muddy bottom, but you can feel that it's slick. Your calling is to do it anyway. Step into the water. Amen.