

Baptized, Claimed and Called

From the series: The Human Face of God

Scripture: Isaiah 41:8-10; Luke 3:1-9; 21-22

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

You may remember that the Episcopal Bishop of Newark, New Jersey, reached out to me when he read in *The New York Times* of my affirmation of God's grace as extending beyond the limits of the Christian church. John Shelby Spong then invited Nancy and me to be guests in their home last May when the English scholar, Karen Armstrong, lectured for the Newark Diocese. Bishop Spong has published a number of books, tackling controversial subjects and pushing the church toward a more open posture, endeavoring to translate the Christian tradition into a new key. Recently I came across one of his earliest writings, just republished, and found these few lines prefacing the first part of the study which is entitled, *This Hebrew Lord*.

Christpower

Look at him!
Look not at his divinity,
but look, rather, at his freedom.
Look not at the exaggerated tales of his power,
but look, rather, at his infinite capacity
to give himself away.
Look not at the first-century mythology that surrounds him,
but look, rather at his courage to be,
his ability to live
the contagious quality of his love.
Stop your frantic search!
Be still and *know* that this is God:
this love,
this freedom,
this life,
this being;
and
When you are accepted,
accept yourself;

When you are forgiven,
forgive yourself;
When you are loved,
love yourself.
Grasp that Christ power
and
dare to be yourself!

John Shelby Spong, 1973

Bishop Spong has been out in front for a long time and I realize more and more that I am indeed a "late bloomer." Coming back from Europe in 1971, I was beginning to look at Jesus "from below" as we said at that time, meaning that New Testament scholars were focusing on the human man from Nazareth, the Jesus of history, in order to understand and interpret how the developing Christian tradition came to its affirmation of Jesus as "fully God, fully human."

The Christian tradition, the Christian church, is the consequence of an historical happening - the life of one Jesus of Nazareth. That he was a fully human being, no one questioned. That he was more than that was essentially the consequence of the sense of his ongoing presence with his followers after his crucifixion.

That he was one with God or that God was with him in some unique sense was the growing conviction of those who constituted that early Jesus movement. The process of development of the claim that Jesus was not only human, but also God, was not a claim Jesus made; in fact, it was not confessed in creedal fashion until the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE and the culminating claim "fully God, fully human" stems from the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE.

What I began to understand as I returned from my graduate study in Europe in 1971 was that the high claims of Jesus' divinity had to be understood from his historical life, a very human life. But it would be twenty years of reflection and preaching before I would preach an Eastertide series in 1992, *From Proclaimer to the One Proclaimed*. One sermon in that series was "How a Man Became God." Over the years, however, I was sensing more and more that it was Jesus understood in his humanity that was really compelling. In Lent 1984, I preached a sermon entitled, "Jesus, You Are Really Something!"

I remember that sermon; I acknowledged that I was really more moved by Dietrich Bonhoeffer than Jesus. I realized it was because Jesus was never really understood in his humanness; he walked through darkness and suffered, but he had a leg up on us - he was also God, wasn't he? How could he really know my "trouble?" It was then that I came to clarity: Jesus experienced what he experienced as a human being. He lived as he lived and died as he died as a human being. He had no card up his sleeve; it was his vision, his faithfulness that

led him to crucifixion. He died the way he died because he lived the way he lived. He was really something! And to follow that one - that was a challenge!

Well, I review that path my own pilgrimage has taken, a pilgrimage you have made with me for however long you have been here, because I want you to know that as we begin a new Lenten journey, we are wrestling again with this same Jesus, his way, his way of being human and his way of living before the face of God.

And, hear this - precisely as he lives a human life before the face of God, he becomes the Human Face of God.

When I read Bishop Spong's "Christpower," I knew this would be my Lenten task - to see Jesus in all of his humanness in order to see in Jesus - in his face - the God before Whom he lived and to Whom he pointed.

We will not look at his divinity. We will not focus on exaggerated tales of his power. We will not reiterate the first and second and third, fourth and fifth century mythology that was created to give expression to the Early Church's faith. No, we will, to the extent it is possible, look at Jesus in all his humanness in order there to see God.

Could anyone so live and so die, could anyone live with such firm resolve, following unwaveringly a vision, could anyone manifest such freedom and constancy except he had a deep sense of being claimed and called?

That is the first aspect of Jesus that we will consider: Jesus knew with profound conviction - God claimed him; God had called him.

How did he know?

How does anyone know?

One sees, that's all. One knows. One cannot prove it, verify the claim, or prove the call. One gives evidence of the call's reality and the claim's validity by one's life, by what one does with the conviction.

This is true not only of Jesus; all who have lived out a vision faithfully with courage and conviction must believe they are under a mandate from beyond themselves. Such a conviction can be misinterpreted, can be the source of destructive fanaticism. Great violence has been perpetrated by persons believing themselves to be called by God. That is an ever-present danger. Nonetheless, nothing of great significance has ever been done in this world without a sense of claim and call, a sense of responding to a compelling urgency not of one's own making.

This was true of Israel. It comes to fine expression in the so-called Servant Songs of Second Isaiah. The reading for this sermon from the Hebrew prophet expresses the call and the assurance that the Calling One will be with the servant to strengthen and uphold. That sense of being called has always marked Israel - a people called by God to be light to the nations. It was that deeply rooted sense that marked Jesus, as well, and when the Gospel writers, decades after Easter, told the story of Jesus, they gave expression to his sense of being claimed and called at the moment of his baptism at the hands of John the Baptist.

Last week there were ten of us from Christ Community at a seminar at Duke University entitled, "Jesus in Context." The leading Jesus Seminar scholars, John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, were part of the panel of scholars along with five others, two of whom were Jewish, who teach Christian origin and New Testament interpretation. There was great diversity among the seven scholars, but agreement on two points - Jesus' baptism by John and his crucifixion under Pontius Pilate.

That there was a significant spiritual renewal movement under John the Baptist is undoubted. John preached repentance and baptism as a sign of renewal at what he and most of his contemporaries believed was the end of the age, the dawn of God's fresh visitation of God's people, Israel. Jesus was a part of that scene; he, too, was baptized and most likely shared the sense of the imminent movement of God to inaugurate God's Kingdom.

Jesus' baptism is recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke. John does not mention the baptism, but associates Jesus with John in the earliest phase of his ministry in Judea. Thus, there is unanimity among the Evangelists that Jesus began his ministry after joining the Baptist movement and himself being baptized. The three Synoptic Gospels record the heavens opening, the Spirit as a dove descending on Jesus, and a voice saying, "You are my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased."

What really happened beyond the baptism itself, we cannot tell. Luke alone says Jesus, following his baptism, was praying when he received the vision and heard the voice. What is clear is that the tradition that gathered around Jesus in the years following his death ascribed to this moment the consciousness of a divine claim and call. From his baptism, Jesus inaugurates his ministry that lasted from one to three years.

What did it mean - that sense of being claimed and called? To what would it lead? What would be involved in yielding to the call?

I think none of that was clear to Jesus as he sensed himself under Divine compulsion. This he knew: no longer was he his own; he was embarking upon a path the end of which he could not foresee. Only this he knew: The Hand of God was laid on him. There was something he must do.

"Must." Yes, in the sense of inner necessity. Could he have resisted? Refused to yield? Certainly. But not if he would be true to himself, for he had "seen" something; he had a sense of something; to be himself, he must give himself to it whatever it was, wherever it would lead.

That is where the struggle comes in - Will I be true to what I have "seen," what I know deep down to be true, what the vision burned indelibly into my consciousness, what the "Voice" declared in the depths of my soul, or will I falter before calling in questioning the conventional wisdom held by the majority, the inevitable misunderstanding of what I "see," the questioning of my motivation?

And who am I that God should claim me for some task, call me to do some special work? What of my family? Will my parents "see"? Will my spouse agree? Will my children suffer? Will I have to give up all plans for normalcy? *The cost.* It will cost to say "Yes" to the claim, to heed the call. It was thus for Jesus.

In the 16th century, Luther said, "Here I stand; I can do none other."

In our own time, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said,

I shall have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people ... Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make this choice in security.

Whatever happened that day on the banks of the Jordan, Jesus left there baptized, claimed and called. He embarked on a path which would lead him to the gory anguish of Golgotha.

Could he have said "No"?

Again, yes, of course. But, he did not; he yielded to the call because he saw something, knew something, and had the courage to act on it.

Our lives will likely be marked by far less drama. Indeed, we might well pray, "Dear God, choose my neighbor." Yet, in the peculiarity of our own lives and in our life together, the same process is going on all the time - in our conversations, in the positions we take or fail to take.

That is the point of this Lenten pilgrimage - Looking to Jesus, recognizing the very real human situation in which he encountered the claim and the call.

In subsequent weeks, watching as he lives into that commitment, perhaps we, too, will sense God in our own lives, become sensitive to what it means to live

before the face of God, and, perhaps in gazing on the face of the one who lived before the face of God, we may glimpse on his face the God before Whose face he lived, and died, for Jesus is the human face of God.

That would be to make a good Lent.

References:

John Shelby Spong. *This Hebrew Lord: A Bishop's Search for the Authentic Jesus*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1993.