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Three Sermons on
Work and Faith

God's Call in Our Daily Lives
by Gary Klingsporn

***The
High Calling
of Our
Daily Work***

*Making a real living connects you to a bigger picture,
a grand design, an abundant life.
Each of us has only a small part to play, but what a part!
It's the high calling of our daily work.*

– Howard Butt, Jr., of Laity Lodge
TheHighCalling.org

A Note from the Author

During the past decades, there has been alarming evidence of a profound disconnect between faith and daily life among people of faith in North America. Studies and surveys consistently show a dichotomy in people's lives between the church and the world, Sunday and Monday, faith and work, faith and daily life.

Within the past few years, however, increasing efforts have been made to address this disconnect between faith and daily life. A growing body of literature is now focusing on a theology of work, the meaning of calling and vocation, relationships between faith and culture, the church and the world. Internet websites, blogs, and ministries, along with other multimedia initiatives, conferences, and study centers, are expanding the conversation around these issues. These are welcome and needed developments.

Sermon Notes from *TheHighCalling.org* seek to contribute to this conversation. The theme of the sermons is daily life and work as calling and vocation. The sermons could be used as individual offerings or developed as a three-part series under a title such as "God's Call in Our Daily Lives" or "Work as Calling and Vocation."

I have chosen one passage from the Old Testament, one from the Gospels, and one from the New Testament Epistles, in part, to encourage future reflection on these themes from all portions of the Scriptures. The three outlines are:

Sermon 1: God Calls Us (Exodus 3:1-12 / Call of Moses)

Sermon 2: You Are My Beloved (Mark 1:9-11 / Baptism of Jesus)

Sermon 3: Love in Action (1 John 3:16-24 / Let Us Love Others)

Sermon 2: You Are My Beloved

Mark 1:9-11

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Theological Point: Like Jesus in his baptism, we in our baptism are called "the Beloved," given the gift of the Holy Spirit, and sent to live out our divine calling in our daily life and work.

Introduction: The vulnerability and uncertainty of life

A. The Beloved: Who Jesus is and who we are

B. The Spirit: The gift of God's power

C. Our Calling: We are sent daily to live our calling

Conclusion: The Voice is always there.

Introduction: I like to begin a sermon with an opening story or illustration that anticipates the theme of the sermon or the problem of the human condition the sermon will address. As often as I can, I want to begin a sermon with something that is not immediately obvious in its relation to the remainder of the sermon. I want to gain the listeners' attention, make them wonder where I'm going, and lead them inductively, step by step, into the heart of the sermon and its main theological point.

For this sermon on the story of Jesus' baptism, one might begin with a personal story about what it means to be "beloved" in a family relationship or friendship. Such an opening would anticipate the words of the heavenly Voice to Jesus: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Another opening might anticipate the phrase "the heavens were torn apart" with a story of an experience of God's presence or disclosure in our lives.

For the purpose of this outline, I'll work with an example of another kind of opening. Given the deep recession, unemployment, and financial crisis the United States has experienced in recent months, one might turn to Time Book's *The Year in Review 2008*. On the opening page, veteran *Time* photographer Anthony Suau caught a picture of a well-dressed man in a business suit standing in the middle of Wall Street in front of the New York Stock Exchange on October 10, 2008, throwing his hands into the heavens in dismay as stock prices melted down. The picture vividly captured the anxiety and uncertainty of people during a difficult time in America. The accompanying article spoke of "the signs of trouble" everywhere, from *For Sale* and *Foreclosure* signs on the lawns of suburban homes to losses of jobs, savings, and retirement. The article read, "The dark mood grew darker as the months ticked by and the credit crunch driving the U.S. economy's slow-motion topple accelerated into a full-blown crash."

After describing the picture of the man in a business suit standing in Wall Street, and after quoting the article, one could make the point that we all experience life like that at one time or another. For any number of personal reasons (health, stress, aging, grief, loss) we all stand like that man, looking up, our hands lifted to the heavens. We all experience pain, loss, vulnerability, the uncertainty of the future. Such an introduction prepares the way for the remainder of the sermon by focusing on the difficult and painful realities of human life as we experience them. The word of the gospel in the text will address these painful experiences.

A. The Beloved. This section of the sermon might briefly but vividly describe the scene as Jesus comes to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. The focus is on the words of the heavenly Voice: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” In Mark’s Gospel, the story of Jesus’ baptism tells us who Jesus is. From the very beginning of the story, Mark wants us to know who Jesus is: Son of God and Servant of all. In the coming of Jesus, something radically new has occurred. The new age of salvation has dawned. God has opened the heavens and spoken in a new and decisive way. The words of the heavenly Voice combine elements of Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1. Exegetical study of these background texts can provide further depth and insight into the meaning of this heavenly acclamation.

The primary thrust of the baptism story is Christological—to reveal Jesus’ identity as the Beloved of God. Having established that point, the preacher could now make a bold move. In his baptism, we see who Jesus is, but we also begin to learn who we are as followers of Jesus. In our baptism, that same Voice comes to us and says, “You are my Beloved.” When we rise from the waters of baptism, we are named God’s beloved sons and daughters. In a world filled with all kinds of other voices, in our baptism, God gives us a new name, a new identity, as sheer gift. Our new identity has profound implications for the way we understand our lives. See Henri Nouwen’s *Life of the Beloved* (Crossroad, 1992, pp. 25-42) as one example of the development of this theme.

B. The Spirit. Mark says that Jesus saw “the Holy Spirit descending like a dove on him.” As Jesus is given the gift of God’s Spirit in baptism, so in our baptism God gives us the gift of the Spirit—the promise of God’s enabling and empowering presence in our lives. Here the sermon could expand briefly on the work of the Holy Spirit in the daily life of the believer. For example, the Holy Spirit is the sustaining presence and the animating power of God at work in the life of the church and the individual. The Spirit gives us guidance and the unique gifts (*charisma*) we need to conduct our daily lives and work.

At this point, one might connect the unfolding point of the sermon back to the beginning of the sermon by recalling for listeners the way in which the sermon began. If the introduction began with a story or illustration about being the “beloved” in our human relationships, or about an experience of God’s presence (“the heavens being torn apart”), tie the elements of “the Beloved” and “the Spirit” back to that opening.

Or, for example, using the opening I described above, one might say something like, “So in those times in our lives when we stand with our arms lifted to the heavens, looking up in fear, pain, grief, or uncertainty (the man on Wall Street), there is always that Voice saying to us, whether we can hear it or not: ‘You are my Beloved—my son, my daughter. I have put my Spirit upon you. I am with you always.’ ” I recommend establishing a vivid metaphor, picture, or quote at the beginning of a sermon and then weaving it through the sermon by referring back to it as part of the transition from one movement of the sermon to another.

C. Our Calling. We are now ready for the final point of the sermon. Blessed with our identity as “the Beloved” and given the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are sent to do God’s work in the world. The rest of Mark’s Gospel describes how Jesus fulfilled the mission given to him by God. We also are sent daily to live out the callings God has given us. Martin Luther said that our baptism is the sign of God’s call to live out our faith in our daily work, our families, and relationships. In baptism, we are called to a common vocation—to serve God by loving and serving our neighbor. Luther said it this way:

“Only look at your tools, your needle, your thimble, your beer barrel, your articles of trade, your scales, your measures, and you will read this saying written on them. . . . ‘My dear, use me toward your neighbor as you would want him to act toward you with that which is his’ ” (quoted in Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, Cowley, 1993, p. 29).

In other words, our everyday work is God’s work. In baptism, we are set apart as God’s people to share Christ’s ministry in the world. Each of us has a calling from God, a divine vocation, “to see the hand of God at work in the world and to see one’s own hands as necessary to that work. Whether those hands are

diapering an infant, assembling an automobile, or balancing a corporate account, they are God's hands, claimed by God at baptism for the accomplishment of God's will on earth" (Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, p. 30).

Conclusion: The Voice is always there. When life becomes difficult and the way grows dark. When we hurt and fail one another, or lose someone we love. When faith grows dim. When our work grows wearisome. When we face an uncertain future. When we lift our hands to the heavens in fear or pain—like the man on Wall Street—the Voice is always there: “You are my Beloved, gifted by my Spirit, called and sent to join me at work in the world. Do not fear, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine. You are precious in my sight and honored, and I love you. Do not fear, for I am with you” (Isaiah 43:1-5). “Beloved” is our name. And that makes all the difference!

Connection to Daily Life and Work: Our daily life and work are transformed when we view them as living out our baptismal calling, empowered by God's Spirit, knowing we are God's beloved children.

Illustrations: In preaching, I tend to focus a sermon around one organizing story, image, or metaphor. I often present that predominate image in the introduction and then return to it as a refrain or “echo” woven repeatedly through the sermon. When I use such a strong opening image or metaphor, I do not feel that every major point or movement in the sermon needs an accompanying illustration.

The style I am describing is like poetry or a song with a refrain. In the outline above, I have suggested an introduction that strongly focuses the sermon. The three points (Beloved, Spirit, Calling) are not so much three major points each needing extended elaboration. Rather, they are three aspects of the biblical passage or story moving toward the main point of the sermon. The result is a sermon with one point, stated above in the section “Connection to Daily Life and Work.” While I may use additional stories or illustrations in a sermon, I prefer the focusing metaphor or image to predominate. I like everything in the sermon to drive toward the one memorable point that can be stated in a single sentence.