

“Our Baptismal Calling”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
January 10, 2021 – Baptism of Jesus

**Mark 1: 4-11**

I don't usually do this, but I'm beginning my sermon today with a preface. With all that we have lived through this week – and it's been a lot – I will get to those events later in the sermon. But to begin, I thought it might be helpful to laugh a little, because we all could use a little levity to lighten our lives right now. And to make it even better, you get to laugh at me, your pastor, who once again had to overcome his fear of one of God's creatures.

How many of you remember the “bat sermon” I preached several years ago? If not, go to the church's website and listen to the sermon from June 17, 2012. I promise it will give you a much-needed lift at my expense. Well, today's message may as well be called, “Bat Sermon – The Sequel.”

Back in October, I was here at church for our Contemporary Worship Planning Meeting on a Saturday morning. I got here around 8:45, and Ann Hamel was already here setting things up in the Fellowship Hall for our meeting. I came in the church office, got things gathered together from my office, went in the Fellowship Hall, filled up my bottle of water, and came back to the church office into the mail room to check my mailbox.

When I came out of the mailroom toward the office door into the main hallway, for some reason I looked down at the floor. And there on the threshold of the office door, in the corner where the door hinges, was this grey blob. I stopped in my tracks, and my first thought was it was a mouse, because Lord knows I've seen plenty of those in my time here at the church. But as I looked closer, I realized it wasn't a mouse – it was too large and not the right shape. Then my mind made the connection, and my heart sank: it was a bat. I could see its wings were all folded up, and its little claws were protruding out on the floor. What I couldn't tell was whether it was alive or dead.

Ann was in the Fellowship Hall, and Lisa, Jeff and Kel had not yet arrived for our meeting. I knew it would be best to remove the bat before anyone else came, and I was hoping to do it without Ann knowing about it. But I also didn't want to do it. I thought about calling Jim Williams, president of the Trustees, because you know, that's what Jim is for! But that would take too much time, and frankly, Jim has to deal with enough in this place, I didn't need to add to his stress. So, I gathered my resolve and said to myself, “You're going to have to do this, Frank. Just do it.”

I gingerly stepped through the office doorway, and the bat didn't move. Maybe it is dead, I thought - that would make this a whole lot easier. I went to the kitchen and got a broom and dustbin on a long handle, and I decided I would try to trap it between the two and take it outside. As I'm walking back to the office, Ann comes out and asks, "What are you doing?" So much for doing this without Ann knowing about it! I tell her there's a bat in the office and I'm going to get rid of it. Ann wasn't taking any chances - she went in the Fellowship Hall and closed the doors!

I propped open the two sets of doors at the south entrance, so that I could just walk/run outside with the bat. Now, I had to confront my fear and just do it. I slowly walked up to the office door, with my tools of extermination in hand, and I prayed fervently that the bat was dead. It was not. As soon as I placed the dustbin under it, the bat started to squirm and hiss at me.

My heart was racing and I may have said something I wasn't supposed to say in church - or anywhere else, for that matter. I trapped the bat between the broom and the dustbin and started walking swiftly toward the open doors. My feet were faster than my arms and hands, because I dropped it. Now it's squirming all around on the floor, and I look up briefly and see Ann's face glued to the glass of the Fellowship Hall doors. I quickly get the bat back between the dustbin and broom, and more slowly than before walk outside with it hissing and squirming in my tentative grasp. I finally reach the yard and drop it on the ground, and maybe even kicked it once or twice to get it further away. As I'm turning around to go back inside, with my heart racing and sweat dripping off my face, here comes Lisa strolling down the sidewalk from the parking lot. "Hey, what's going on?" she asks. "You're welcome," I said, and then explained the harrowing events of the last ten minutes. To this day, I have no idea how it got into the building. But I hope I never have to deal with that again!

It's never easy facing down our fears. It's never easy doing something we know will be hard and difficult. But sometimes we realize that it is the hard, difficult things we must do, because circumstances demand it.

It could be as humorous or trivial as dealing with an unwanted rodent in our home or workplace. It could be as significant as telling a friend the hard truth about how their emotional state is impacting your relationship in a negative way. It could be as gut-wrenching as telling a young man his father has died, and then sitting with him through the breadth of emotions that come pouring out. It could be as unbelievable as holding a patient's hand while she takes her last breath in the hospital, and because of Covid, you are the only one allowed to be with her in that moment.

Life is hard, especially in this particular moment in time. As individuals, as a church, as a community, as a nation – we are facing moments that we never thought we would have to face. Yet they are here in front of us – and we must decide how we will act.

The good news and hope we have as followers of Jesus Christ is that we do not face these moments alone. Through our baptism, we are made members of the Body of Christ. As members of this body, we are strengthened, supported, encouraged, and empowered to live out our baptismal calling not just within the walls of this space, but every day we are blessed to be on this earth.

That hope and strength comes first from the fact that the one we follow was baptized himself, showing us what humble service truly is. John proclaimed that, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me . . .” And yet, that more powerful one acted in humility, coming to John and being baptized in the River Jordan just as so many of John’s followers had been before. Jesus didn’t ask to be anointed or crowned before throngs of people – he came to his cousin, John, was prayed over and immersed in the waters of the Jordan, and he modeled for us what it truly means to be his disciple.

And God made clear who Jesus was to all who were witnesses that day. “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’” (1:10-11). That was the affirmation and confirmation that Emmanuel – God-with-us – was present in the world, and that this man would change the world through his words, his love, his actions, and ultimately, through his death and resurrection.

We become followers of Jesus Christ through the vows we make at our baptism. They are questions we answer that affirm our faith in the one Triune God, and they confirm our intention to live out our baptismal calling our entire earthly life. Indeed, when we gather for a funeral to celebrate a believer’s life, we will pray, “We give thanks for your servant, O God, whose baptism is now complete in death.” The waters that sprinkle, touch, and envelope us in baptism also mark the covenant we promise to keep throughout this earthly life, and then to one day be welcomed into the eternal kingdom which our Lord has promised to all who trust and believe in him.

But those vows are not something we make at one moment in life, never to return to them in the future. They are vows that must constantly be remembered, reaffirmed, and renewed, for they reflect our commitment and adherence to the one who is more powerful than us, yet serves with humility and love. As part of our worship today, we will reaffirm our baptismal calling by answering the questions that were asked of us when we were baptized or confirmed as members of Christ’s Church. I would encourage us today to think long and hard about what

our answers to those questions truly mean, in light of all that we are living through as disciples of Christ today.

Do we trust in the gracious mercy of God whenever we are faced with difficult, frightening, or hard decisions? Do we repent and turn from the ways of sin – sin in all of its active and passive forms? Do we recognize evil when we see it and renounce it – not ignore it, not shrug it off, not wish it away? Do we renounce the evil of racism, of bigotry, of xenophobia, of idolatry – and say clearly and without hesitation, “You have no power in this world”?

In turning away from evil and sin, do we turn toward God, turn toward the source of light that shines in the darkness, turn to God’s beloved Son, and follow him fully, completely, and unapologetically? Do we trust with our whole selves that Jesus is our Lord, he is the one who has saved us, and our full and total allegiance is to him who is gracious and loving to us and all of God’s beloved children?

Will we be Christ’s disciple, and in affirming that realize what that requires of us? Will we obey the commandments Jesus has given us – love our neighbor and our enemy as ourselves, speak truth to power, love the least in our midst – or will we cower in the shadows, afraid of the repercussions of professing “Jesus Christ is my Lord”? As we have been loved by Christ, will we show that love to this broken, hurting world, no matter how hard, how risky, how unpopular it may be?

As I said in my pastoral letter to you on Thursday, “As a follower of Jesus Christ, I do not wish to be characterized by the events that transpired (on Wednesday) in Washington, D.C. I feel even more convicted to treat my neighbor with love and respect and dignity. I am even more motivated to hold my elected officials accountable for how they fulfill their office, because words and actions matter. I feel even more empowered to welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned – for that is where Christ calls us to encounter God in our world. This has convicted me – has it convicted you?”

As we seek to live out our baptismal calling in these difficult, challenging times, we do not have to do so in isolation. Through our baptism, we are part of a community of believers who strengthen one another, comfort one another, and yes, hold one another accountable. For God not only says to God’s only Son, “You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased.” God also says that to each of us, for we are all blessed with the power of the Holy Spirit to love, serve, and shine the light of Christ into the darkness of this world. May today be one more reminder of that blessing, and be our opportunity to reaffirm with confidence, joy, and gratitude: “Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior, and I will follow him all the days of my life.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.