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## Gratitude for Grace

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Harkins  
Epiphany 1 – Year B

*In the Name of the God of Creation who loves us all...Amen. Good morning, and welcome to the Cathedral on this first Sunday after the Epiphany.* Well, this is where it all begins: the baptism of Jesus is really the occasion—the true beginning—of his calling. Even in Matthew and Luke, who begin with stories about his birth, Jesus' baptism is the starting point of the main narrative. It is here that the adult Jesus shows up on the stage of history. In this story, baptism means more than repentance and cleansing. Here, theologically understood, baptism issues in the anointing of the Holy Spirit, the giving of an incarnational, redemptive identity. God says to Jesus: "You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased." Although this epiphany is a public revelation in our telling of it, the words come intimately to the praying Jesus, and by extension we all bear witness to it as well. Much lies ahead for Jesus from this point, and we hear in this passage that the people were filled with expectation. He must live out this identity and meet those expectations laid on him, and we do well to pay attention to how John has been speaking about the anointed one already; remember how the crowds will project their hopes and desires on him. This too, informed John's vocation—his calling—a calling fully realized in this text for today. Jesus' baptism thus leads us to consider the meaning of "vocation," a word that has lost much of its resonance through repeated use, both secular and churchly. The psychiatrist Carl Jung had a sign inscribed over the front door of his home which read, "*Bidden or not bidden, God is present.*" It is an English translation of the Latin quotation which Jung found as a student when studying Erasmus, the Renaissance scholar and humanist. *Vocatio* means calling, but "calling" in our culture often denotes simply one's job or career, one's chosen profession. The notion that it is God who calls seems a commonplace piety when we are talking about "church vocations," calls to "ministry" or "the religious life," but it sounds more like an afterthought or theological overlay in regard to ordinary life. Vocations are the way we make our livings, and avocations — the things we don't have to do — provide our recreation.

Many years ago, as I first began to consider ordained ministry, Bishop Frank Allan said this to me: "I think we get it backwards in our tradition. We have ordination certificates framed and hung on the wall, and our Baptismal certificate, if we have one, and if we know where it is, is only wallet sized. It should be the other way around. The priesthood of all believers means just that."

I agree with this. So what does Baptism mean, theologically understood, in the sometimes mundane everydayness of our lives? In one of my favorite movies, *Tender Mercies*, Robert Duvall plays the role of Mac Sledge, a washed up, alcoholic country singer, who awakens at a run-down Texas roadside motel and gas station after a night of heavy drinking. He meets the motel owner, who is a young widow named Rosa Lee, played by Tess Harper, and offers to work in exchange for a room. Rosa Lee, whose husband was killed in Vietnam, is raising her young son, Sonny, on her own. She agrees to let Mac stay under the condition that he does not drink while working. The two begin to develop feelings for one another, mostly during quiet evenings sitting alone and sharing bits of their life stories. Mac resolves to give up alcohol and start his life anew. After some time passes, he and Rosa Lee wed. They start attending a Baptist church on a regular basis. Mac's redemption and self-improvement run parallel with his conversion to Christianity. Mac is eventually baptized for the first time, along with Sonny. After they are baptized, Sonny asks Mac whether he feels any different, to which Mac responds, "Not yet," indicating Mac's belief that his reconciliation with God will eventually lead to transformation. Mac's response — "Yes, ma'am, I guess I was" — to a fan who asks if he was really "The Mac Sledge," the country music star, suggests that his

former self has been washed away through baptism. During one scene, Rosa Lee tells Mac, "I say my prayers for you and when I thank the Lord for his tender mercies, you're at the head of the list." Mac, like Abraham, did nothing practical to guarantee or deserve such a miracle. Despite his selfish and abusive past, Rosa Lee takes him in and eventually falls in love with him, despite his having done nothing to deserve her care or his redemption: "It is an undeserved grace, a gift of providence from a simple woman who continues to pray for him and to be grateful for him."

Mac experiences his spiritual resurrection even as he wrestles with death, in both the past—Sonny's father in the Vietnam War—and present—his own daughter in a car accident. One might say that Mac found a new "*vocatio*"—a new calling—beyond that of being a country music star. He rose from the waters of his baptism with a grace-full gift.

Yet, our language of vocation is problematic not just in its churchly usage (where the distinctions and congruities of "inner" and "outer" calls can trip us up) but in the more common reality of a multiplicity of calls with competing claims upon the stewardship of our lives. We don't have just one vocation, and we struggle to balance different responsibilities and relationships. Anointing one of our vocations as holier than another may be a dangerous thing. Is my ministry more a vocation than my marriage, or my responsibility as a citizen less than my relationship to my children, and now, to my grandchildren? The claims of others call out to us, often by name, and often out of genuine need. When Thee Smith, my twin brother in ordination, and I were ordained in this space in 2001, Bishop Alexander said that we should remember that we are not professors who happened to be ordained, but priests, after the order of Melchizedek, who teach. I have found this to be a deeply important and significant ontological understanding of vocation. It is a vocational tapestry woven of threads from academia, and the clinical office, and the church—and it all begins right here, at this altar, on Sunday and flows out from there into the world. And what if our vocations seem to change in the course of life? If what one once felt called to do or be no longer seems right, what then? Sometimes, of course, the covenants of the past must hold us in faithfulness. But sometimes new callings arise and lives are remade in response. What of those who are adrift, unsure of any calling? Our lovely imagery of vocation then seems naïve, better suited for the supposed stability and limited choices of an earlier age. As Wendell Berry reminds us;

"It may be that when we no longer know what to do,  
we have come to our real work  
and when we no longer know which way to go,  
we have begun our real journey.

The mind that is not baffled is not employed.  
The impeded stream is the one that sings."

But consider this: the calling of Jesus in today's Gospel is not about a job or a career. It is not a word of mission, sending him into the future; at least, not at the outset. The word of baptism is first of all about the delight of God in this beloved, this chosen, this child called by name. Not a call to do, but a *calling that names*. I love to imagine God delighting in Jesus, and in each of us, as any parent delights in her or his child. As for Jesus, my sisters and brothers, so it is for us. Our first calling, the baptismal calling, is the one that simply loves and names: *You are my child. I delight in you*. The words embrace us and promise to hold us. This is where it begins, and this is also, we dare claim, the last word, the one that holds our future. Yet in between that beginning and that end, this baptismal call *will often become a call to action*. It will mean mission and ministry and all kinds of tasks. Anointing is a sign of blessing, but it is also a commissioning. As it was for Jesus, so it is for us, the Body of Christ in the world. Our parents and teachers and scores of others called us and sent us to the vocations of our lives. These vocations have come through human voices and relationships, institutions and communities; they call to us in all the ways our lives find form and function. The tasks and duties do matter, but what abides — our identity, our belonging, our hope — begins where we hear "You are my child, beloved," and where we are raised to the new life of grace; sustained in Holy Spirit; given an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love God, and the gift of joy and wonder in all God's works." So it is with each of us. I pray that our vocations, whatever they may be, are warmed by the Holy Fire that lives in each of us. And I pray we remember that the Holy Spirit who anointed us on the day of our Baptism is there to assist, encourage, inspire, and sustain us. And I give thanks for each of you, and for the ministries we share in this sacred space, and beyond. Amen.