

"The Meaning of Your Life"

Introduction

Have you ever had those days when you say, "Why is all this happening? Why is it happening to me? What is the meaning of my life?" Perhaps the most important question anyone can ask is: what is the purpose of my life? Or why am I here?

Jesus' Baptism and Calling

Today we mark the event of our Lord's baptism: when he kneeled before John the Baptist, water was poured over him and God spoke. The baptism of Jesus begins the story of his mission and the meaning of his life . . . It is also the starting point for understanding the meaning to *your* life.

In his preaching John the Baptist had the people on the tiptoe of expectation. He spoke of one "mightier than I" who was to come. He predicted that this one to come would go beyond baptizing with water. This mighty One, he said, would baptize people with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Spirit (in both Hebrew and Greek - languages of the Bible) means breath or wind. God's breath or wind moved across the waters at creation to bring forth life. Then God breathed on Adam to make him alive. As the Creator breathed into the first human to give him life, so Christ breathes into us to create new people. Jesus baptizes people into a new, holy life. In Him we are made alive and find life in its fullness. John the Baptist said the Messiah would also baptize with fire. Fire can symbolize zeal or purification. John the Baptist meant that the Messiah would judge people and some would be sent to the fire, if they refused Him. Oh yes, we still need to confess our sins so that the Holy Spirit can burn them away, or we are liable to be consumed by those sins. Fire also refers to the power found in the Holy Spirit as later described in the book of Acts for the day of Pentecost. You've heard of people "fired up" for the big game or something they're excited about. To be baptized is to be readied; at the starting line, set to go into this life fired up for God.

We know (from the Bible) that Jesus was given a great purpose by God, and that he fulfilled that purpose, with some struggles, and moved on to glory. The Bible also tells how you and I also have a purpose, and we too will face struggles; but we can also move toward God's glory.¹

¹reference *Pilgrim's Progress*, by John Bunyan

Our Baptism and Calling

That scene down by the river, with John the Baptist, gives a preview of things to come. As the Bible says "... when all the people had been baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens opened." This is a mirror image of the later description of Pentecost (Acts 2). On that day all the Christians were baptized by the descent of the Holy Spirit. God is trying to tell us something here: we share in Jesus' baptism. Even though individuals are baptized, it's a group event. Baptism is not an inoculation but an initiation. It is not a shot against getting more sin, but an initiation into the community of Jesus' disciples: those living for God. The Holy Spirit makes us God's agents.

Life is only genuinely satisfying when it is lived for God; because God made us that way. Anything less means we are not doing the very thing we were made for. TV, pop culture, consumerism are simply ways to foster the discontent, shallowness and disconnection that so many people experience as life. TV, movies, and now perhaps the Internet call to us to come *out* of life. They comfortably distract us from our mundane, unfulfilled lives and struggles saying "I have come to take you out of life." *Jesus says*, "I have come to give you full life; not to pull you out of the emptiness of ordinary life, but to invest your daily life with meaning and purpose." Christianity is not pie in the sky by and by; it is an earthy fistful of life in the here and now. To embrace Christ is to embrace life; "life to the full" as it was intended to be.

Fred Craddock (well-known preacher) tells a story of a vacation he and his wife took together in the Smoky Mountains. A distinguished older gentleman came to their table in the hotel dining room. He was, as it turned out, a celebrity -- a former governor of Tennessee. When he discovered that Craddock was a professor of preaching, the man said he had a story to tell him, a story about a preacher.

It seems that when the governor was born, his mother wasn't married. He never knew his father. Now that may not seem so unusual today, but in the Southland of that era, that made for a difficult childhood. The other children used to taunt him and call him names. They used to ask him when his father was coming back. Whenever he was out with his mother in public, he was painfully aware that he had but one parent.

One day when he was about ten, this boy was in church. Usually when the service was over, he found his way discreetly out the back door -- which meant that he never talked to the minister, never had to share his name. On this particular occasion, though, the boy got swept up in the crowd and before he knew it, there was the pastor at the front door, his hand extended.

"Well, son," the preacher's voice boomed out, "whose boy are you?" He could hardly have asked a more embarrassing question. The boy flushed and started to stammer -- but before he could say anything more, the preacher (still gripping his

hand) said: "I know! You're God's son!" He slapped him on the shoulder and said, "Boy, go claim your inheritance."

The boy never forgot that incident. He never forgot the preacher's kindness in not drawing attention to his single-parent family. He never forgot the way he sent him out either: "Go claim your inheritance!"

Long after he became one of the most popular governors in Tennessee history, this man still delighted in telling the story of the day the preacher told him he was a child of God. It was almost as though a voice had spoken from the heavens: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." That was the day the boy received the blessing.

When we are baptized we too receive the blessing and a calling to spread healing and hope in this world. This means three things:

- 1) we begin to be transformed for the better by Him (i. e. purified – the Holy Spirit is like a refining fire);
- 2) we are commissioned to tell the good news that there is hope for others to be transformed; it is as simple as sharing with others what difference Jesus has made in your life;
- 3) and, we are committed to the nurture of others whom we invite to join us.

Called Together With Jesus

The preacher Richard Raines once compared the people of his culture to plankton, the tiny organisms that live in the sea and are simply carried along by the currents wherever they went. For some, that seems like an attractive way to live. There is no stress, no expectations. But ultimately it is not much of a life. A person needs some purpose to live for. When Jesus calls us to take up our crosses and follow him, joining him in the ministry of the servants of God, he gives us a precious gift. He gives us a purpose that is worth living for.

Many years ago journalist Charles Kuralt, in his best-selling book, *On the Road*, wrote of Hack, one of the true-life characters he met on his travels. Hack asks him, "Are you a Christian?" Charles answers, "More or less." Comes Hack's reply, "More is better."

How true! Half-hearted Christians are usually joyless and never do much for Christ or this world. Lukewarm disciples only limp in their spiritual life - how can they run the race set before us?

Jesus redeems us from a meaningless life, by his example of living and by His continuing presence through the Holy Spirit. He doesn't offer us a life free from hardship, but he promises to bring blessing to us out of the difficulties we face. He doesn't offer us a life of happiness and self-fulfillment, but one of deep contentment, unwavering purpose, solid joy, and fulfillment in him. He doesn't offer the bright lights of celebrity life; he extends to us the bright promise of forgiveness, healing, and new life. This is not a fairy tale, a TV docudrama, or a mini-series. It's the real thing!

Our children, our extended family, our neighbors and co-workers, will never know God and the life-giving power of His Spirit if we do not teach and live the real thing. The first place they may ever meet Christ could be in you. That's why Jesus' first commandment to us is to love one another.

In our "Discovering Membership" class here at First Church, we learn that every member is a minister. God calls each Christian into ministry to serve God's great purpose of redeeming all humanity into God's family. The idea is not that we do the work for God, but that we are so loyal to Him, so fired up for Him, that He can do His work through us. *That is what I mean by "moving toward God's glory."*

Being a Christian means being on fire for the gospel of Jesus Christ and it also means regular relighting at the eternal flame of Christ. God didn't just create us and set us down here by ourselves. He maintained a contact, starting with that babe in a manger, and he keeps it open, always, through the Risen Christ and His body the church. Our biggest task is to always stay focused on the flame that is Jesus and be ignited by His power – no other flame will do.]

2010 may well be a great year of blessing for us as individuals and as God's congregation here at First Church. I say that because I can see great challenges ahead for us. But I also know this: joy is not found in leisure, but in victory. Christ gives us the victory; and the challenges that may lie ahead are opportunities to partner with Christ, to win the victory, and to experience His eternal joy.

The Lord wants to bless us with the Holy Spirit; the Lord wants us to be so fired up that we'll live as the sons and daughters of the living God. God is offering each of us a great purpose in life. God is calling you and me to partner with Jesus, so that He may say of us, "In you I am well pleased."