

Summons to ministry

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [February 21, 2001](#) issue

After a large Sunday dinner, family and friends gathered in the living room of my grandmother's rambling house for the event that made me a Christian. Lifting a silver bowl filled with water, the preacher said some ritual words, made some promises and then baptized me.

There is much about my baptism that I would have done differently. Baptism properly belongs in a church, not a living room. Yet God manages to work wonders despite our ineptitude. And becoming a Christian is something done to us and for us before it is anything done by us. As an infant I was a passive recipient. Someone had to hold me, administer the water of baptism, tell the story of what Jesus had done and the promise of what he would do, and model the life of faith for me. It was all gift, all grace.

Thus I began my life as a Christian by water and the word. Thus the whole world began. Brooding over the primordial waters, God speaks and a new world springs forth. And in each generation, God makes the church, calling by water and the word a new people into being.

Jesus's ministry began with his baptism by John. As Jesus stood in the Jordan the heavens opened and a voice proclaimed, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased" (Luke 4: 32). The scene reminds us of the Spirit of God brooding over the primal waters, creating a world which God then pronounced as "very good." Luke follows his baptismal account with an unexciting listing of Jesus's genealogy, tracing his paternity all the way back to Adam. This is Luke's way of reiterating the gifted quality of the Beloved. He is a gift from heaven, but he is also the bequest of a gaggle of ordinary folk like Peleg, Eber, Shelah, Noah and Adam. He is both a gift from God above and from Israel below. When it comes to our relationship with God, we are respondents, not initiators.

I am the product of a human family with all the goodness and badness of most any family, of a people who had clung to the promised land of upcountry South Carolina for five generations, scratching out a living through cotton and cows—until my

generation decided we would rather live off of schools, churches and hospitals than work the land. Yet as my baptism signified, I was also a gift of God. Heaven was mixed up in who I was and was to become. Some divine condescension, some incarnation was mixed into my humanity.

From the day of my baptism, in ways that I'm still discovering, it has been impossible to fully explain me without reference to the water, the promises, the story, the hands laid upon my head. Whatever criticism anyone might raise about the way I was baptized, that baptism worked. Here I am, telling the story that was told to me, that I am still learning to tell—the story of discipleship.

As soon as Luke is done with Jesus's genealogy, he begins the story of Jesus' ministry. Ministry is both the gift and the assignment of baptism. As Luke tells us, "Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and . . . he began to teach them in their synagogues" (4:14). Our culture tells us that our lives are self-derived and self-constructed. We are who we choose to be, the sum of our decisions. Baptism is a countercultural reminder that we are here in service to God. We are in ministry with Jesus to the world because that is what we were put here to do.

"This is really unacceptable," I told the first-year divinity student who had just informed me that she would once again not have her paper in on time. "You're going to be a pastor. Pastors must be punctual. You can't stand up on Sunday and say, 'I had hoped to have a sermon for you today, but first one thing and then another came up. We're going to break up into buzz groups instead of listening to me preach today.'"

"I agree with you," she told me. "I have few obvious gifts for ministry. I'm always late. I'm too old. I'm a lesbian. I know I have no business being in seminary. I've told God that repeatedly. My being here is God's idea, not mine."

Upon reflection, I thought she had it about right. We are in ministry, in service to God and God's world, because we have been called and put here by a God who just loves to make something out of nothing.