

**January 15, 2017**

**TEXT: Isaiah 49:1–6, (John 1:35–42)**

**TITLE: Potentials & Possibilities**

Once, many years ago, I had a little girl refuse her own baptism. I'd met with the family earlier in the week and shown the little 2-year-old the baptism font and the basin up top that contained the water I would gently sprinkle on her head. She was shy but attentive that day. But when we reached that part of the Sunday service in which the family was supposed to come forward, the little girl refused to leave her pew. I had done my introduction to the sacrament, and the father and grandparents had joined me at the font. But the little girl held tight to the pew rail, shook her head and closed her eyes, and no amount of cajoling from her mother standing beside would get her to change her mind. So what was I to do? A forced baptism didn't seem theologically sound. So I turned to the congregation and said, "Friends, this conversation about baptism will be continued at a later date." At which point the family sat back down with their daughter and the service went on as planned.

They say hindsight has perfect 20/20 vision. You can look at a past event and trace how the choices you made long ago led you to where you are today, analyzing the sequence of events as if with perfect vision. Reason thrives on hindsight. Reason confidently tells us that because point A was followed by B, C and D, of course you ended up here at point E. But the truth of the matter is that if you asked people back at point A if they can imagine themselves someday at point E, they might have thought it highly unlikely. Looking back is easier than looking forward. Reason thrives on hindsight, but faith—well, faith relies on foresight. It is forward-looking, trusting in potentialities and present possibilities that, with God's help, will lead us safely onward to a future destination.

Lots of things are done every day built around potentials and possibilities. Seeds are planted trusting that in time they will sprout and bear fruit. Ideas are put down on paper that will later develop into great inventions. Notes are jotted down on manuscripts that will later be expanded into symphonies. Here in the church, every baptism is an act of forward-looking faith. A child or person is presented before God, baptized with water and the Holy Spirit, not for just that moment or as a logical continuation of what has gone before, but as a preparation for what is to come. It is a door opening onto a future—a start date for a life to come—all shaped by and made sacred by a loving God who knows our todays and all our tomorrows.

Now, reason may interject here and insist that just as it could analyze our past behavior precisely, telling us how points A, B, C and D led to destination E, reason can claim that if we leave E and follow a path through F & G, we'll end up in the future at point H. Plant the seed in this type of soil, water it frequently, and without a doubt it will grow this tall and produce fruit twice a year. Or send a child to this elementary school, high school and college and she will go on to this

career and a life of guaranteed success. 100 years ago, there was great enthusiasm for eugenics—a theory that believed the science of breeding certain sheep or goats in order to get better livestock could be applied to human couples as well. At the time there was a conversation between the brilliant but homely George Bernard Shaw and a dazzlingly beautiful but empty-headed actress from the London stage. She gushed, “Oh Mr. Shaw, we ought to have a child. What a prodigy the infant would be with my looks and your brains!” To which Shaw replied, “But my dear, what if it got my looks and your brains?”<sup>1</sup>

Humans can make reasonable plans for the future. We can look over where we’ve been and draw a line toward where we wish to go, but we all know how plans can change—things happen, good and bad, and we end up in different places than we imagined. Reason is nice, but faith is better. Faith affirms that God knows our potential, knows our life possibilities; and not in a controlling, fatalistic way, but rather in a loving parental way. God sees us as a young seedling, a topic sentence for a great novel, a child discovering its place in the world. What unfolds in our future will still be shaped by our free will, our choices, mistakes, and successes. Yet the entire process—the paths traveled and the roads not taken—are fully known by God. And none of them can lead us beyond the reach of God’s love. Believe this: Wherever you are, it is always possible to take a next step by faith toward God—toward the potential and possibilities God has always seen in you from the very beginning.

This idea is found throughout the bible. The prophet Isaiah said, “*The Lord called me before I was born; while I was in my mother’s womb God named me.*” The prophet Jeremiah’s first pronouncement says almost the same thing: “*The Lord said ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you, appointing you a prophet to the nations.’*” The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Galatians went a little deeper into this lifelong plan of God for his life, saying “*God set me apart before I was born and called me through grace and was pleased to reveal God’s Son to me so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles.*” These words are not spoken to suggest that Isaiah, Jeremiah and Paul are better than others. This is not self-focused bragging; rather it is other-focused testifying. They point to an unmerited grace and an everlasting love from God, who knows us completely and calls us to a life of relatedness and trust and faith. This is not a status we earn, but rather a reality we welcome, as we are washed by baptism waters and have blinders removed from our eyes so we can see that we are known and called and redeemed and loved.

That’s why the call story in the opening chapter of John’s gospel is so great. Two disciples of John the Baptist heard John call Jesus the Lamb of God, so they sought him out. When they found Jesus, they weren’t sure what to say. So Jesus initiated the conversation with one of those wonderful, two-layered questions: “What are you looking for?” Literally, what are you looking for—can I help you find something—as well as metaphorically, what are you looking for, hoping for, yearning for deep within your souls? The disciples, somewhat flustered, said,

“Well, rabbi, uh, where are you staying?” To which Jesus again gave a double answer—“Come and see.” Literally, “follow me and I’ll show you the house where I’m staying and teaching”; metaphorically, “follow me and in that walking by faith, you will learn and see and discover all the wonderful potential and possibilities untapped within you, but eternally known by God your Creator.”

Everyone likes advice on what they should do to lead a happy, successful life. That’s why the self-help section in bookstores is always so full. Wise modern philosophers like Cameron Diaz include in their books sayings like this: *You are both the oldest you have ever been and the youngest you will ever be.* And it’s true—you are as old and wise as you’ve ever been, plus as young and full of potential as you’ll ever be. But is that enough?

In deciding where to go in your future, it is wise to trust someone who’s already been there—the One who is the Lord of yesterday, today and tomorrow—the One who knows us completely, past, present and future. God’s guidance doesn’t start with an entrance exam or a “to do” list you need to first complete. God starts with a promise and an invitation. As God said to the prophets and apostles, God says to us, “I have known you and called you from the very beginning of your life.” And as we make our journey down life’s road, Jesus comes alongside us, asks what it is that we are truly seeking, and then, smiling, offers his invitation for us to “come and see.”

Two last points. First, don’t be surprised if God’s understanding of our potential and spiritual possibility exceeds our own expectations. We may be tempted to downplay our abilities. We may say, “Yes, Lord, I want to walk by faith with you into the future, so I’ll do my best and shine my little light here on the path just in front of me” only to hear God’s laughing response, “No, no, that is too small a thing. I’m giving you a big light—a light to the nations—that I want you to shine and live into so that my good news may reach to the end of the earth.” Like it says in Ephesians 3:20: *God’s power is at work within us and is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.*” And as we remember Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. this weekend, it is precisely this sentiment that led him to end his “I Have a Dream” speech with his vision of a time when “all God’s children, black and white, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hand and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, ‘Free at last, Free at last, Great God almighty, we are free at last.’”

And the second thing: Remember that girl that refused to be baptized in church years ago? I wasn’t too worried when she vetoed her baptism. She had been a child of God since her birth; nothing had changed that. God’s love had always been with her, so what happened that day hadn’t diminished that. Her family was active in the church and in time the couple had another daughter. And when it was time for the younger sister to be baptized, now the older sister was ready to come with her to the baptism font. The potential and possibility of the later baptism had been there in the words and worship of that first interrupted baptism.

God knew about this chain of events all along. Our task is to trust in the good news of Christ and walk by faith, not sight. Come and see!

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Peterson, Where Your Treasure Is, p. 22.