



**Led To Lead: God's Gift and Our Vocation**  
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**Carol R. Jacobson**

I want to begin with a story. Many years ago now, I was teaching a first grade class at Vacation Bible School. I had a dozen or so students and our task for the week was to learn together about the life of Jesus. The first part of the week went very well, I thought. Using our prepared curriculum, we learned stories about Jesus from the Bible -- stories about his birthday, accounts of Jesus' loving and healing children, even the story about Jesus becoming lost as a child in the temple.

My first graders loved to listen to and interact with these narratives. We celebrated Jesus' birthday and learned about how we celebrated birthdays in our own families. We found out that Jesus healed sick children and talked together about being sick and about how happy we are when we feel better. We discovered that even Jesus got separated from his parents, and shared stories about how scary it is to be lost and to feel all alone. Together, we discovered that Jesus was a special person - God's son and a real friend to the children he met. And, we learned that Jesus was *our* friend too - someone who loved us, cared for us, and was always with us, even when we felt sick or lost or alone.

It wasn't until Thursday's class session that I began to worry. On this day, the story of Jesus' life turned toward the narratives about his passion and death. Should I tell the biblical stories of Jesus' imprisonment, torture, and death to six

year olds, I wondered? How could I help them understand what was happening to their friend Jesus at the end of his life without frightening them or breaking their hearts? Had I set the children up for emotional trauma unawares? As the curriculum suggested, I told the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem to the children and we imagined it like a parade. We made musical instruments and special hats for everyone and gave Jesus a "Welcome to Jerusalem" parade around the church grounds.

But, as I approached the end of Thursday's session, it was time to tell my students the next part of the passion story. I had to find some way of telling them that their friend Jesus was arrested by authorities, tortured, and eventually executed. I swallowed my fears and began. I told the children that some of the important people in Jerusalem were jealous because Jesus got a parade and they didn't get one. They were so jealous in fact, I continued, that they arrested Jesus and took him to jail! My *plan* was to ask the children about whether or not *they* were ever jealous of someone else, but one little boy, no doubt concerned for Jesus' fate, blurted out, "They aren't going to kill him are they?" *Now what*, I thought! What should I say to answer this little boy? "Yes," was the correct answer of course, but could I or should I really *say* that? What would happen if I did?

Fortunately, before I could say anything at all, another child in the class turned to the little boy who had asked the question and said, "Don't worry, I've heard this story before. He raises from the dead. It's really cool!" And, as I breathed a big sigh of relief, the children began to ask me if that was really true [I happily assured them that it really was]. They began to cheer for their friend Jesus, who had risen from the dead. We put on our parade hats again, picked up our instruments, and gave Jesus another parade - an Easter parade! We didn't talk

about Jesus' imprisonment, torture, or death at all that day. That wasn't what was important to these children. Instead, we celebrated the good news of Easter together - our friend Jesus raises from the dead. It's really cool!

I tell this story because *amazingly* this six-year old child is a wonderful example of what it means to be a disciple, a leader, and a witness. He certainly was all three in our class that day! We don't often think of young children this way - after all, they're "just children." And yet, I want to say that this child is indeed a disciple, a leader and a witness.

"Don't worry," the little boy said, "I've heard this story before." What a delightful response that was! It wasn't until years later that I wondered just where that young student *had* heard the story before. In church? In Sunday School? On his mother's or father's lap? Where had this young child first heard the story about Jesus' death and resurrection? Who had told the story? A pastor? A parent? A teacher? A friend?

Whoever it was who first told him the story, it is clear that this young child's previous encounter with the story of Jesus was an important and meaningful one for him. He remembered the story, and even more, he wanted to tell it to someone who *hadn't* heard it before. This is good news indeed for all of us who are involved in educational ministries. As faithful disciples and Christian educators, we value the biblical story and the good news of God's love for us that we encounter there. We want our children to know and value the Bible and our Lutheran heritage, as we ourselves have come to value it. We want our children to hear the stories of God's love for them and for all creation -- stories that we ourselves have come to cherish.

But how does that happen and who is responsible for its happening? How do our children and youth come to hear the story of God's love given to us in Jesus

through the power of the Holy Spirit? How do youth and young adults come to make this Gospel story their own? How do adults continue to grow in faith, love, and obedience to God's will for their lives?

I want to suggest to you that it all begins with our baptism, which is to say it all begins with God, who comes to us in water, word, and promise; makes us his own; equips us with the gift of faith; and calls us all to grow into vocations of discipleship, leadership and witness. We are led by God's Spirit - poured into our hearts at baptism - **led to become disciples and led to become leaders and witnesses for the sake of the Gospel.** As Martin Luther says in his *Large Catechism*,

...baptism is no work which we do, but a treasure which God gives us and of which faith lays hold. ... Hence every Christian has enough in baptism to study and practice all his life.<sup>1</sup>

In baptism God gives and we receive. What we receive, Luther calls a treasure - a gift. And apparently, it's the kind of gift that keeps on giving! It is a gift and a calling that guides our study and our practices for the rest of our lives. It is our baptism that equips us both for a life of discipleship - what Luther calls study - and that bestows on us the vocation of leadership and witness - what Luther calls practice, that is the practice of faith. In the waters of baptism God ensures that the story of the Gospel will be heard, that young people will embrace this story as their own, and that all of us will continue to grow in faith and discipleship as long as we live. But, as St. Paul reminds us, in order for the story to be heard - someone must tell it. Someone had to tell the young boy in my VBS class Jesus' story. That's where you, and I, and the whole Christian community on earth comes in. In baptism, Luther says, we are given a treasure - a treasure we are called to share.

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<sup>1</sup>Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, 130-31.

And maybe that's where we get a little nervous. We know the Gospel is a treasure, but is God sure *we're* the best ones to share it? Shouldn't that be left to professionals? Apparently not. God gives us all we need to be effective leaders and teachers of the Gospel - these gifts come to us at our baptism, at the very beginning of our Christian life.

Let's see now. What gifts *does* God give to us in baptism? Listen first to the words contained in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* baptism rite.

In Holy Baptism our gracious heavenly Father liberates us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are born children of a fallen humanity; in the waters of Baptism we are reborn children of God and inheritors of eternal life.<sup>2</sup>

Listen also to this prayer from the baptism rite:

Pour out your Holy Spirit upon those baptized: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence.<sup>3</sup>

In these brief excerpts we learn what it is that God gives us - the treasure of which Luther spoke - how God equips us both a life of discipleship and for a vocation of leadership and witness. As you can see on your handout, these gifts are:

- forgiveness
- rebirth
- eternal life
- wisdom and understanding
- counsel and might
- knowledge and fear of the Lord
- joy in God's presence

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<sup>2</sup> Holy Baptism, *Lutheran Book of Worship*, 121.

<sup>3</sup> Holy Baptism, *This Far By Faith*, 66.

Quite a list! What do these gifts of God have to do with being lifelong disciples and effective leaders? Let's take a look at the first three on our list: forgiveness, rebirth, and eternal life. These three are the "bottom line" so to speak. That is, these gifts from God assure us that in baptism we are reconciled or put right in our relationship with God. In the waters of baptism God forgives all our sins, liberates us from the fear of death, and gives to us all eternal life - that is, a future with God that will never end. By God's grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, and the power of the Spirit given in baptism, forgiveness, rebirth, and eternal life are ours and God has made whole what sin had broken. These gifts make possible a life lived in service to God and neighbor, and equip us for leadership in Christian community.

And that is not all God bestows at baptism. The list of gifts also includes: wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and fear of the Lord, and joy in God's presence. These gifts are also ours, no matter how old we are, no matter how well we did in school, no matter how wise or brave we feel, no matter what doubts we have about our own abilities. These baptism gifts, too, are irrevocably given for us - God grants us wisdom and bestows on us capacities for understanding. God blesses us with perception, empathy, and courage. God reveals himself to us as the Source and Sustainer of our very lives. God creates joy in our hearts as we worship and serve. With these gifts, God makes us whole and, through these gifts, God makes disciples, leaders, and witnesses of us all.

But, you might be thinking, OK, I agree that everybody is a disciple, but not everybody can *really* be a leader, can they? We all know, as the saying goes, that "too many cooks spoil the broth." Well, apparently in God's way of looking at things, everyone, by virtue of their baptism is a leader - apparently in God's way of

thinking there can never be too many cooks. Each one of us has been called to a vocation of servant leadership and faithful witness. That is why the congregation makes this acclamation at the end of our baptism services:

We welcome you into the Lord's family. We receive you as fellow members of the body of Christ, children of the same heavenly Father, and workers with us in the kingdom of God.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, our common baptismal call to discipleship and witness is also announced for all to hear when the pastor declares in the rite that,

Through water and the word, the Holy Spirit calls us to walk a new life in God. In this new life we are joined across time and space to our ancestors who have lived and died trustingly and to the whole Christian community on earth. Their witness supports our Christian journey.<sup>5</sup>

All the baptized, then, by virtue of that baptism, are called and set apart for a journey of discipleship and life of leadership and witness in the Christian community and in the world. And, it seems, these two - a life of discipleship and a calling to leadership go hand in hand.

As the baptismal rite in *This Far By Faith* emphasizes so well,

As Apollos was instructed in the way of the Lord, you join this community's teachers and elders in handing over the Holy Scriptures, the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments. Do you intend to act in the way for your children and for the sake of Jesus? ... Do you intend faithfully to lift them up in prayer, nurture and help them grow in the Christian faith as you are empowered by the Holy Spirit?<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Baptism, *LBW*, 125.

<sup>5</sup> Baptism, *TFF*, 65.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

Each of us is made a leader - that is a teacher and elder in the community. Each of us is given the responsibility of passing on the Holy Scriptures, the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments. We do this, the rite reminds us for the sake of those newer in the faith and most especially for the sake of the Gospel itself.

At this point it seems that leadership, discipleship, and witness get all tied up with one another - the marks of a disciple and the marks of a leader and the marks of a faithful witness become the same marks: lives marked by teaching, by prayer, and by nurturing faith. The invitation to discipleship and the call to leadership are one and the same thing - a treasure, Luther says, that can and should shape a lifetime.

Why is it, exactly, that we are called to this kind of life - one of discipleship, leadership and witness? As the baptismal rites themselves remind us, we do this both for the sake of those who come after us, and most especially for the sake of the Gospel. Our calling to be disciples and leaders is not a private calling, given to enhance our private life experiences. Rather, God calls us for the sake of the world and in recognition of its deep need for the good news of the Gospel. We are called to be disciples and leaders and we are *sent* to be witnesses to all that God has done for us and for the world God loves so much. Listen to these closing words from the *This Far By Faith* baptismal rite:

You have not been called in vain. Therefore, take up your cross and follow Jesus through the prairies and grasslands, in the desert wilderness, along the freeways and back alleys of suburb and city. You belong now to God, sent to witness for Christ before all the world.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, 66.

As leaders, we have not been called in vain, but rather to follow Jesus into the world. We are sent forth from our baptismal rebirth in order that through our practices of discipleship and our exercise of leadership we may give witness to Jesus Christ and his reconciling work in all those various contexts and locations in which we live. We are sent as witnesses in our homes, our workplaces, our congregations, our communities, and our country. God's treasure, poured into our hearts at baptism, is meant to be given away in servant leadership and faithful witness wherever we find ourselves. For this reason, Christian leaders are always disciples of Jesus Christ, and disciples of Jesus Christ are always leaders and witnesses to the power and promise of the Gospel. Why do we do this? Because our world needs to hear God's Word of love, reconciliation and forgiveness for Jesus' sake. As the writer Kathleen Norris puts it so well, our calling to leadership means that

...we cast the Word of God out into the world, into each human heart, where, to paraphrase the prophet Isaiah, it needs to go to fulfill God's purpose. Isaiah uses the metaphor of rain to convey this - rain that disappears into the ground for a time, so that we can't see it working. And then, it bears abundantly.<sup>8</sup>

Let us rejoice and give thanks for this abundant life of discipleship and leadership to which we have been called and through which God's purpose for us and for our world is being fulfilled. We've heard the story before - Jesus is risen from the dead! It's really cool!

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<sup>8</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, 246-47.