

## Oath of Office

Genesis 1:1-5 and Mark 1:4-11

Certain positions of public trust carry such solemn responsibility, coupled with such potential for the abuse of authority, that they may only be assumed after first taking of an oath of office. There is an oath of enlistment for members of the Armed Forces, an oath taken by Judges and police, a Hippocratic Oath for doctors, vows taken by ordained clergy, and an oath that comes with the office of President.

Most of these oaths share a few common elements. One feature that they have in common is the emphasis upon a term of service to a higher authority than oneself, to which the oath taker pledges allegiance. In the vows that I took at my Ordination, that authority is the Word of God as found in scripture. For those in positions of public service that higher authority is the Constitution.

Many oaths also contain an implicit call to humility, and an ever-present awareness of how our human limitations always present a risk to our faithfulness in keeping the oath. The response to each tenet of my Ordination vows was, "I will, relying on God's grace." For those entering public service, from soldiers to Presidents, the oath taken typically ends with, "So help me God."

The common expectation in all of this, is that the office defines the person taking the oath. Not the other way around. The purpose of any oath is to ensure that anything about the individual's character that might compromise the faithful fulfillment of their duty, is to be subordinated for the greater good. In biblical language, these oaths are a call to repentance over whatever might conflict with the execution of the office.

John the Baptist did not redefine the "office" of being a prophet of God's Word. The office, defined him. Right down to the clothing he wore and the food he ate. Most of all, John never let his own ego eclipse the role God had entrusted to him. Not even in the face of the great popularity he had among the crowds of people who came from the whole Judean countryside and from among all the people of Jerusalem, to the wilderness to be baptized by him in the Jordan River. He was adamant about not promoting himself. He refused to tailor his message to cultivate their approval through flattery or telling them what they wanted to hear. Instead, he bluntly proclaimed that they needed to repent of their sins so they could receive God's forgiveness. He deflected their high regard for him by proclaiming that his role was merely to prepare them for an encounter with someone else.

You might say that the oath of office that kept John himself from losing perspective on his role was this, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandal. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." To put that statement in its proper perspective, the task of untying the sandals of a guest was the job of the lowliest servant in the household. As you can see, John was crystal clear that his prophetic role was not to enhance his personal status, but to prepare people for one who was greater than him. The one of whom John spoke—the one he pointed others to so that they could follow Him and not John--was Jesus.

Every single person from then to now who has been baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have entered into the office of being a disciple of Jesus Christ. The promises made at our baptism, or at our confirmation of promises made on our behalf when we were a child, are our Oath of

Office for our role as disciples of Jesus. The Oath we take is to follow in the way of Jesus. To resist oppression and evil. To show love and justice. To witness to the work and Word of Jesus.

With the help of God.

One day during the Holy Land pilgrimage that some of us went on last February, we visited the Jordan River, at or near the exact place where John baptized Jesus. At the water's edge, we reaffirmed our baptism. We renewed our Oath of Office as Christ's disciples. Today, during this service, we will be reaffirming our baptisms, as well. We do this not because our original Baptism was not permanent.

It is. But our resolve to live out our Baptism is sometimes fleeting. Renewing what it means to be baptized followers of Jesus is necessary from time to time to maintain our fidelity to that oath of office.

In the original Creation of all things, God's Spirit swept over the waters and God said, "Let there be light." God separated the Light from the Darkness and named each of them for what they were. Our baptism with water and God's Holy Spirit marks us as new creations. Different from who we would be apart from the presence of that Spirit. Our baptism calls us to be children of light. Not only in name, but in deeds of compassion, peacemaking and justice building. To name the darkness of our world for what it is. The darkness of hatred, violence and injustice. Even when it hides behind masks of righteousness and patriotism, such as it did in Washington in these last days.

Those events are being referred to as the "Epiphany Insurrection." Partly because of the timing, that it took place on the liturgical Day of Epiphany. More significantly, I might add, is that the word epiphany literally means "a sudden, intuitive perception of or insight into the reality or essential meaning of something." The Epiphany Insurrection was just that. A sudden, jarring insight into the reality of a darkness that has settled over our nation.

As baptized Christians, we are held to an oath that compels us to separate ourselves from and bring light, to darkness. To repent of our having let our guard down when it may have seemed that the darkness did not appear to be a clear and present danger to us personally. Even when it brought peril to the neighbor that we are called to love no less than we love ourselves. Because our own fidelity to that oath can waver it is important for us to lean on God's Spirit to reveal what our own eyes might miss.

Darkness cannot drive out darkness. God brings light where there was darkness, but we have been assigned a role in that enlightenment. Baptism is our oath to participate in the saving and renewing work of God. And that is something worth celebrating and reaffirming, as we do now...

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