

For the past 13 years I've had the opportunity and privilege of participating in spiritual formation retreats at St. Anthony's Spirituality Center in Marathon City. Three times each year I would meet with other people of faith to experience the Scriptures in a quiet and reflective way. While on these retreats, our group was always welcomed by the St. Anthony's staff. All of the staff members have the gift of hospitality, but the director of the Center, Fr. Dan Crosby, always made it a point to greet each of us personally. Recently I received a newsletter from St. Anthony's which included a lead article by Fr. Dan, in which he talked about one of the things that his parents had taught him during his growing up years. He wrote: *“When I was a child I remember (my parents) telling us (that) they prayed every night that each of us boys would do what God wanted us to do. Thanks be to God, I never forgot that... I learned, too, that this means not just figuring out whether you're supposed to be a priest or get married, but each morning, when we rise to greet the new day to ask: “What do you want of me, (today) Lord?””*

Throughout the Scriptures we have heard the stories of people whom God has called into ministry at particular times in the history of God's people. Each story is unique and each acceptance of God's call is different, but what we find is that Abraham accepted the call to become the father of God's people and to go to a new land that God would show him. Moses ultimately accepted the call to become the deliverer of God's people who were enslaved in Egypt. In the middle of one night, 12-year-old-Samuel made himself available at God's call, to become a prophet to his people. Isaiah, at God's call, volunteered to be God's messenger with the words: **“Here I am. Send me!”** Jeremiah, who was also called to serve God, but felt he was too young, finally accepts God's call to become a prophet during a critical time in Israel's history. Mary, the mother of Jesus, accepted her calling into this role, saying: **“Let it be to me according to your word.”** Each of Jesus' disciples heard his invitation and responded, walking by faith as Jesus taught them how to minister. All of these persons made a commitment to “do whatever God wanted them to do!”

In a book written by Rabbi Abraham Heschel, the author makes this statement: “The deepest experience a human being can have is the experience that something is (being) asked of him or her.” One of our members here at Wesley has made the comment that we all need to be needed and wanted. In fact, one of the most important things that we do in a community of faith is to help each person understand God's call on their life.

Today we are linking the Gospel lesson from Matthew with our Isaiah Scripture from the Old Testament. The Gospel lesson is an account of the Jesus' baptism. John the Baptist--Jesus' cousin--had already begun his ministry of preaching and baptizing--calling the people to confess their sins and to turn from them, and to prepare the way for the Lord to come into their world and into their lives. Then one day, as John was preaching and baptizing at the Jordan River, Jesus also came to be baptized. John says: **“Jesus, I should really be baptized by you.”** You see, confession and repentance of one's sins was what John asked from the people who came to him for baptism. However, Jesus was without sin, and so John at first doesn't want to baptize him. But Jesus says: **“Let it be so now, let me be baptized; for it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.”** Jesus' purpose was to fulfill the law, and to identify himself with those who were under the law, whom he came to save. And so he humbly recognizes John's authority as God's messenger, and is baptized. And directly following Jesus' Baptism, a wonderful affirmation takes place.

Jesus sees the Spirit of God coming down from heaven and resting on him, and God the Father speaks, saying: **“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”**

Jesus’ Baptism has been described as his inauguration into ministry—a commissioning, if you will, to begin his life’s work as the Savior of the world. As we now look back at the Isaiah Scripture, we hear words that sound very much like the words that God the Father spoke to Jesus at his Baptism: **“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.”** The author of our Isaiah lesson understands this servant to be both a person--such as a prophet or king--and the nation of Israel itself. Some scholars hear these words as a prophecy about the character and mission of the Messiah who is to come. And this servant has a special task, which is to bring God’s teaching to the nations, and restore justice to all people in the world.

Today, these words of Isaiah are being addressed to us as well. What this means is that we, as God’s people today, have also been named as God’s beloved servants, in whom he delights. We also have been claimed by God for a special mission on earth. And because we, too, have been baptized, our life has been identified with Jesus’ death and resurrection—meaning that we have died to sin and risen again to new life through the sacrifice of the sinless Son of God. And this new life includes being called to express Jesus’ character and mission. We are to live our lives as Jesus lived his life – imitating his way of thinking and acting. We are to seek justice for those around us, to act mercifully, and to walk in a humble relationship with God. We are called to bring encouragement to those who are losing heart, to persevere in being kind even when life becomes challenging. We are called *to be light in the world*, because we have been given the light and love of Jesus Christ. And God calls us to take the light of his love into all the dark places that are within our sphere of influence – and to make God’s love known to those who aren’t able to recognize it in their lives, to share it with those who are imprisoned in un-life-giving behaviors, and to bring it to those who live in depression and have given up on themselves, and don’t feel they even deserve God’s love.

A little over 2 years ago our denomination adopted 4 mission goals, which are: strengthening lay and pastoral leadership, creating space for new people to find a place within our communities of faith, attending to the needs of the poor, and addressing health issues, worldwide. The mission of Wesley Church is to be a community of faith that knows, loves and serves Jesus Christ, and invites others into a relationship with him. For the truth is that wherever we bring the light of God’s love, we are bringing forward the kingdom of God, which is God’s will for us, and his call to us, again, in this New Year. Amen.