

Here I am Lord!

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the Baptism of the Lord, January 9, 1994. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Dateline, Los Angeles, the summer of 1989. Larry Walters, a 33 year old man, decided he wanted to see his neighborhood from a new perspective. He went down to the local army surplus store one morning and bought forty-five used weather balloons and picked up several cylinders of helium. That afternoon he strapped himself into a lawn chair. Several friends tied the now helium filled weather balloons to the chair. He took along a six-pack of beer, a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich, and a BB gun. He planned to shoot the balloons, one at a time, when he was ready to land.

Walters assumed the balloons would lift him about 100 feet in the air. He became somewhat anxious, however, when the lawn chair, with him in it, soared more than 11,000 feet into the wild blue yonder. It was cold up there and the oxygen was thin. He floated smack into the middle of the air traffic pattern at Los Angeles International Airport. Some pilots thought they were hallucinating when they looked out the cockpit window to see a man floating around on a lawn-chair. The airport was forced to shut down its runways for most of the afternoon. Meanwhile, Walters was too frightened to shoot any of the balloons. He stayed airborne for more than two hours.

Soon after he safely landed, police arrested him. Reporters shoved their microphones into his face as he was led away. "Were you scared?" "Yes!", he said. "Would you do it again?" "No!" he didn't think he'd do it again. "Why did you do

it?" "Because," he said, "you can't just sit here." (Gonzales, Leadership, 1993, p. 35).

Getting baptized can be as dangerous as strapping helium filled balloons to your lawn chair and taking off. Look at Jesus! He got baptized. The Holy Spirit came down upon him. God said, "You're my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." And, immediately, the Spirit sent him into the desert to be tempted by Satan. Tempted! Tested! Struggling with temptation. With wild animals. Controversy follows him wherever he goes. The religious establishment turns against him. He's arrested on trumped up charges and crucified as a criminal. It's a dangerous thing to get baptized.

In his autobiographical book Creative Dislocation, Robert McAfee Brown remembered the day in 1960 when he participated in a Lutheran worship service in East Berlin, only a short time before the Berlin Wall was constructed. There weren't many people present. Church attendance was viewed with suspicion by the communist state. The East German Republic had developed secular alternatives to replace all of the rituals of the church like baptism and confirmation and Holy Communion. Nevertheless, a young couple were there in that Lutheran service, presenting their child for baptism. Brown was amazed. Why, he wondered, would they jeopardize their future and the child's by insisting on this ancient ritual of baptism when a secular alternative was available. That couple wanted to see life from a different perspective than that offered by the communists. Like Summers, who strapped himself into a lawn chair and flew on with helium filled weather balloons, this couple couldn't just sit there. They risked doing something

dangerous. They presented their child for baptism (Long, Shepherds in Bathrobes).

Baptism initiates us into the people of God whom God's Spirit sends out to struggle in this world with the powers of darkness. Baptism initiates us into the people of God where everybody has a gift, everybody has a job, and nobody has a right to just sit there. All of us who've been baptized have been called by God to ministry. If you've been baptized, you can't just sit here.

God gives us jobs. You take up the offering. You pray. You give money. You usher. You greet people. You sing hymns. You pack and deliver Christmas food boxes. You sing in the choir. You listen to sermons. You organize and plan Nomad dinners. You make announcements and share joys and concerns. You volunteer to direct a Christmas pageant involving nearly a hundred energetic young people. You participate in Bible studies. You serve food in the kitchen. You visit sick people. ^{You prepare food, raise dinners} You telephone the lonely. You oversee the rebuilding of the church. You run for public office. You provide transportation for shut ins. You take public stands which are sometimes unpopular. You sell apple crisp, pop-corn and apple cider at the apple festival. You serve on committees. You help with the youth group and teach Sunday School. You prepare and deliver meals when people get sick or have babies or do both at the same time. You study controversial issues. You send birthday cards to members. You put together and staple the Lamplighters. You take tapes of the worship service to shut-ins. Why do you do it? Because you just can't sit there knowing what Christ has done for you. Today we ordain and install elders and deacons. Elders and Deacons are ordained

to be kind of cheerleaders, to encourage all of us to serve the Lord. Ask an elder or a deacon if they're scared. Like Larry Walters, they'll say, "Yes!" Ask the elders and deacons who are going off if they'd do it again? Right now, they'd probably say, "No!" They've just served as elders and deacons for three of the most busy and demanding years in our 250 year history. When these elders and deacons began three years ago we had no building. The insurance claim had not be settled. The walls of the old building were still standing. These elders and deacons have been tested in the wilderness. They've made agonizing and, sometimes, unpopular decisions. Sometimes they've been criticized. In the last four years since the fire, serving as an elder or a deacon in the Oxford Presbyterian Church is about as dangerous a vocation as strapping weather balloons to a lawn chair and soaring. Why did they do it? Because they just couldn't sit there.

Several months ago about a dozen men and women said, "Yes" when asked if they'd serve as elders and deacons. They're all scared about what God has called them to do. In a few moments I'm going to invite them to come up here. Then we're going to strap them to lawn chairs, attach helium filled balloons to them, and send them on an exciting three year adventure. They'll be tested. They'll be tempted. Sometimes they'll feel their surrounded by wild animals. But angels will attend them. The Holy Spirit will empower them. Why do they do it? Because they can't just sit there.

Eternal God, at the baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan you proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit. Grant that all who are baptized into his name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.