

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith
Holy Comforter
Richmond VA
January 11, 2015; the 1st Sunday after the Epiphany
Readings:

United with God and Each Other Through Baptism

I love today's reading from Acts.

"While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

Funny...right?

The Paul goes on to inquire about their baptism...whose baptism did they receive...John's they say...well, Paul goes on, good as that was, it was not the baptism in the name of the Lord...but was rather pointing to what Paul was able to offer them, then and there.

They are baptized, they receive the Holy Spirit, and they are changed.

Baptism changes people.

Baptism changes people in spiritual ways that we usually cannot see, and baptism changes people in that, through baptism, we become members of the body of Christ both spiritually and in fact...we become members of the community of faith and ministers of the Church.

We baptize in the name of God, in the name of the Trinity, and we say, as I will today, that the person baptized is now sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever.

Sage Elizabeth Goode, who will be baptized today, has always been God's beloved child, as are all people, every person in the world.

Today through her baptism, she will be united with God in a special way through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

No matter what she does in life, where she goes, no matter what groups

she joins, she will always be united with Christ...Christ will be united with her...she will always belong; she will always have a church to call home.

Baptism is forever.

I once found a website put together by a self-proclaimed atheist, who refuted all that the Church claims as truth.

This is the United States, everyone is welcome to believe or not believe whatever they choose...religious freedom is a core value in our nation, and in the Episcopal Church.

What I found interesting about his beliefs....is that one who claimed not to believe...offered to remove people's baptisms.

If you don't believe in it, why would you need to remove it?

This is all to say...my main point...is that being baptized, being sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism is for ever.

It cannot be removed...and it has the potential to change everything...although it is not magic...it takes some effort on our part.

No effort is need to receive all the grace that baptism gives...baptism is about salvation, which is given as God's free gift out of God's great love, we could never earn it if we tried...this is one of the great claims, one of the two great pillars of the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century...justification by grace alone...the other being, the universal priesthood of all believers.

But baptism is also about this life, and what we do in this life, and who we are as Christians in the world in our time, in this place.

Baptism is about community; today, Sage becomes a member of this church, of the diocese, the Episcopal Church, the Anglican Communion throughout the world, and the Church, universal, beyond our denomination.

She is made a minister of the church...at this time her ministry is somewhat

limited in action ...but not in love...the way she is with us...open,
loving, trusting, smiling...she is reflecting God to us, and
gracing us with her life.

What a gift she is to her parents, to her family, and all of us.

Today her parents and Godparents make the commitment on Sage's
behalf, and as she grows, when she is older she will have the chance
to make an adult affirmation of the faith through
confirmation...and in how she chooses to be part of the church.

This is the part that takes some effort...to be part of a community of faith is
not always an easy thing to do.

Sometimes it is not easy because we can't quickly agree about the color
of paint we need to paint the walls, but sometimes, it is soul
wrenching as it is now in the Church with regard to the tragic
death of Tom Palermo.

Tom died as a result of being struck while cycling, hit by a car being driven
by a Bishop of our church, Bishop Suffragan of Maryland, Heather Cook,
who was drunk.

How will we support the Palermo family?- some are doing so by
contributing to a fund for his two children to pay for college.

How will we process this as the Episcopal Church?

When one part of the Body is hurting we all hurt.

It is early days on this, but I am hopeful that working together and being
real about the issues surrounding this tragic situation, others can
be helped and that we can become more sensitive to issues
around drinking and the Episcopal Church, how it
is viewed, and how we talk about it as a community.

True community, real Christianity, is able to face such challenges, as well
as care for those who have been hurt and those who are suffering.

In both the joys and the challenges, we are here for each other....and we
are explicit about that in the Baptismal service.

Today you will promise to support Sage in her life in Christ, and you are
invited to sign her baptismal certificate today to demonstrate your

commitment.

Community, community, community, with God and each other...that's what this crazy church thing is all about...God has brought us together for a reason, for many reasons.

We are blessings in each others lives...you are in mine...and united in our love for God, we help many people in our hurting world.

As difficult as church can be sometimes, as challenging as it can be, the promise of it is great...we see that...we are living it...working together, with God, to discern and then do those things we believe that we are called to do....

Such as replace the HVAC, care for the sick, feed the hungry, provide positive group activities for children and youth, provide engaging educational programs, fight for justice for the marginalized, and more.

Baptism is forever.

One is a Christian whether one belongs to a church or not.

Yes, one can commune with nature and feel God's presence alone in the woods or by the river.

But the difference between being a Christian on one's own and being a Christian in community, is like the difference between having a baseball glove and a baseball, and tossing it up and down, in the air by yourself verses playing a baseball game on a team in a stadium.

Tossing the ball up and down can be fun, but it is limited.

When we are with others, we can live the Christian life to the fullest with all the various aspects that we bring to each other and enable each other to be and to do.

As part of the Baptismal service, and we did this last Sunday for the Confirmation service, we will renew our baptismal covenant.

This is the covenant made with God at baptism, and we need each other to

keep this covenant.

We need to be here for Sage.

The covenant contains questions that require some reflection and living into...

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers? I will, with God's help.

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord? I will, with God's help.

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ? I will, with God's help.

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? I will, with God's help.

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being? I will, with God's help.

Each of these questions, as you heard, is answered by the promise, I will with God's help.

One of the greatest ways that God helps is by bring us into a faith community...by giving us to each other.

I sometimes like to make suggestions for prayer and reflection that you can take away with you.

Consider these questions...in two ways...how you answer them as an individual, and how you are able to answer them as a member or friend of Holy Comforter.

I conclude my reflections today by turning to the Gospel reading.

We are observing the Baptism of our Lord today...a the Sunday following the Epiphany, and it is a Sunday particular appropriate for Baptism.

What do we learn from the account of the baptism of Jesus?

“as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”

We see the Trinity, the Voice of God from Heaven, the Son, and the Spirit. At Jesus’ baptism, we hear the voice of God name him and claim him, and God is pleased.

You might remember your baptism or imagine it, if you were so young that you don’t remember it, hear God call you the beloved, God is pleased, God is excited...God is excited about who Sage is and who she will be for God in the world.

God is still excited about us in that way too...imagine that.

Our read stops here, but the very next thing that happens in Mark’s account, is that Jesus is driven into the wilderness and tempted, and then after that, Jesus begins his ministry.

Isn’t that like our lives too?

We hear the voice of God, we feel God’s love, and then we are in the wilderness of our lives...if you are in a wilderness time now, remember that you are God’s beloved, and all this is preparing you for the next stage of your life.

And we are here to help each other, with the small things and the big things.

Baptism is forever...you are united with Christ forever...and you are part of this fellowship of love, this community of faith for as long as your journey brings you here. Amen.