

Sermon

Preacher | The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring

The Gospel | Luke 3:15–17, 21–22

Date | January 9, 2022



**ALL
SAINTS'**
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

'All that we are, all that we may hope to be, we offer to you, the God of our new birth. Amen.'

When some of you saw who was back at All Saints' this morning joining our beloved Martha Sterne for the forum, I imagine that you were looking forward to a fine sermon today. You might therefore be a little disappointed that I am not, in fact, Barbara Brown Taylor. I get that a lot as it happens. After a while, you get used to it.

Today has indeed been a day to look forward to. We're remembering and giving thanks for a remarkable era in this church. To have Harry Pritchett, Barbara Brown Taylor and Martha Sterne all together again here at All Saints' is something of a family reunion with three priests who have enriched the life of this parish in deep and profound ways. Perhaps Thomas Wolfe was wrong, and you can come home again, at least for a day.

Yet what we're talking about today in the forum - this church's passage through the AIDS crisis in the 1980's - is more than merely nostalgia. Story-telling in the church is never only about what has been. We gather today to share those memories in the hope that a new resonance might be felt. Perhaps it will happen for you. Something you weren't expecting. The Holy Spirit stirring up the baptismal waters as she is wont to do each time a new life mystically joins Jesus there in the memory of his own baptism which we heard retold in Luke's gospel a short moment ago.

Yet, what we hear, what we remember, what we believe is hardly ever the same. At the 11:15 a.m. service/later this service we will invite baby Bowen, the latest saint of this church, to enter the baptized life. We will say words that have been set aside for us to say together the same way tens of thousands of Episcopalians have done over decades of life in the church. Yet, what we will mean in saying those words will vary enormously. What do we mean when we proclaim Jesus as our Lord and Savior? What are the 'spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God'? And how exactly should we 'seek and serve Christ in all persons'?

In many ways Episcopalians welcome the newly baptized into a kind of holy chaos, a fellowship of the perennially undecided. Perhaps it is part of the gift of this kind of Christ community. If you don't like what an Episcopalian has to say about God just wait a minute, there's another one coming round the corner - you're bound to get a second opinion. When I prepare families for baptism I call this the 'generous orthodoxy' of the Episcopal Church. Confident enough in its middle of the road Christianity that it says things like the Nicene or Apostle's Creed out loud on a Sunday, yet spacious enough to have room for any number of interpretations of what those words mean.

[So, for Bowen, soon to be baptized into the fellowship of this wild and wondering household of Christ followers, I invite you in time to make your stage entrance to this never-ending play so we might know your passion, your heart and voice for what it means to love God and the world God has made and is making new, even through you.]

Yet holy chaos is more than merely everyone for themselves. Instead, we are invited to be shaped by something. As the words of the baptism service remind us, there are practices and commitments that we are intended to hold in common so that they might form something in us for the good of lives beyond our own: sharing in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers. Striving for justice and peace among all people, and respecting the dignity of every human being. These are the kinds of practices that we hope will birth and nurture something new in us, offering a vision of what it means to be human more expansive and glorious than we would have managed to see alone.

In the time in history we remember today in this church, part of that common experience that formed us here was in bearing witness to the faithfulness of those who cared for loved ones taken by the ravages of AIDS. Perhaps some of you sitting here today can recall how that courage and grace opened something new in the heart of this church, and in your hearts also. It is fair to say that without the lived testimony of that era, All Saints' would be less than the church it is today. And in this season of Epiphany, the season where we recall how God makes Godself known to the world, to remember those days is to remember a time where the fullness of things was revealed in ways we had not seen before.

Yet our actions, our lives are not the primary elements of the life of faith. It is the movement of God toward us that is the source and sustenance of our hope as baptized followers of Jesus. As Isaiah proclaimed to a people who themselves had suffered the pain and loss of exile, driven from their land, their freedom to worship and self-governance, that movement of God is both intimately personal and universally given:

'I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I'll be with you... when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned...Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.'

In a world of confusion, quick to anger, slow to forgive, God's first word is 'I love you'. God says, I act in the world because I love you. I stir up the waters of baptism, of your baptism, because I love you. I raise up prophets and pastors and lovers of fellow human souls, because I love you. And it is the first order of business for the mission of the church to proclaim this truth to the world, that people might know that we are not alone in this life. What's more, somehow, by grace, as that first word of God sinks in, everything else is gifted the strength and confidence to follow it – all our

striving together and struggling alone for a more just and reconciled world. For God's movement of love is a word we can trust in. It's a word our lives can feel their way around. It's a truth we can learn to recognize through the lives of others. It is indeed our living hope.

I would like for us to remember that, always, but this year in particular. Today's wonderful conversation with Barbara and Martha is the start of a season of discernment that has the potential to shape the future of our life as a church in significant ways. Later, this fall, we hope to invite one another to share how we feel God is calling us to use this block to serve God in this city. It will be a great, big, and I hope wholeheartedly joyful conversation to have, and we will take our time, seeking to hear every voice, and to open our hearts and our minds to the Spirit and to one another as we go. To prepare for that work, these next few months we are first asking who it is that God calls us to be as a church for the generations to come in our mission and ministries. No doubt, this being All Saints', we'll get busy thinking some excellent thoughts about the future of music, and worship, and formation and ministry in the community. Yet I'd like first to invite you to feel the questions we'll ask before you think them. To pray what in your heart, what in your gut, what in your bones most seems right and true and faithful and born of God's love for this church's future. For the invitation - whether for one newly baptized life or for all of our lives - is to trust that in the end, the future belongs to God.

'I have called you by name, you are mine...and I love you'. Words to live by: through the crisis and loss of AIDS, through this pandemic, [through the early days of parenting a newborn child], through this time of discernment in this church. Our future belongs to the God of love. I cannot think of a more hope-filled invitation to walk into together. For all the saints, old and new, may it be so with us. Amen.

