

Epiphany 2 - Baptism – Year C

My friends, today we are thrice blessed. The readings are rich, the feast – the Baptism of Jesus – is rich, and our marking of the 135th anniversary of the founding of this parish of St. John’s Church is rich. The question is, how do all these things fit together? How do they “talk” to one another? What can we take away from it all?

Edward Audlin, Joshua and Mary Miller, Alexander and Mary Ann Stevenson, Joshua and Sophie Smith and their adult children Charles and Letta, William Brown, and Mrs. John Morgan: These were the 12 Episcopalians who gathered together for worship from the Book of Common Prayer with Edward Audlin licensed as a Lay Reader in 1869. St. John’s was officially designated as a mission church in 1872 and Joshua Miller was named Lay Reader in Charge. In the early 1880s, Dwight May donated this property for a church, and William Brown built the church. The cornerstone was laid ceremoniously on October 19, 1882, with Edward Audlin, the man who had laid the foundation of the Episcopal faith in the community, laying the first stone of the building, in a service read by members of the congregation, since no clergy were present. The church was completed in late December 1883 and was consecrated by Bishop Gillespie on January 10, 1884. Hence, we celebrate this Sunday as “Founders Day.”

The consecration of the church was a huge celebration. William Brown arranged for special trains and carriages to bring in the crowd. Early in the service, William Brown read aloud the “instrument of donation and endowment” which was signed by Mr. Brown, Edward Audlin, and – take note – Stella Leaton. Women have been significant in the history of St. John’s since its beginnings! Much was written about the feast that followed the service, held at Bennett House. The sermon that day was given by Rev. B. F. Matrau, the rector of St. John’s Church in Saginaw. The entire text of the lengthy sermon was printed in the paper.

You will be happy to know that I do not intend to repeat that sermon here, but Rev. Matrou said some things worth our hearing this morning: “This house,” he wrote, “betokens a truth old as the human soul. It registers a want of our nature ever new and ever present – communion with God... It is a visible testimony to an unchanging and abiding faith.”

In the years that followed – the 135 years between then and now, there were periods when there was no priest and the people gathered together for prayer on their own. Although the mission was made a parish in 1900, a rector would be hired for a year or two, then leave because there was no money to pay him. There was even a period of several years in the late 1920s and early 1930s when the parish was closed – only being reopened by the Bishop in 1936. Through it all, it was the Ladies’ Guild (as it was called then) who managed to keep things alive. The Ladies’ Guild essentially served as the Vestry during those early years, even holding the mortgage on the property, until an official Vestry was installed in 1936 – at which time the women were not eligible to serve as members of that body.

Things have changed, yes? But that unchanging and abiding faith to which Rev. Matrau referred in his dedication sermon remains with us today. Our understanding and our expressions of our faith most certainly change as we grow as individuals and as a community. What is unchanging and abiding, though, is a the heart of faith grounded in the Scriptures we heard today.

Thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

Those words, uttered by Isaiah to encourage the people dispersed and carried into exile, spoke also to our St. John's forbearers, giving them the courage to persist, to remain faithful. And they speak to us today.

In today's Gospel, after Jesus was baptized, a voice from heaven says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." We heard the same message from Isaiah: "Thus says the Lord who created you: I have called you by name; you are mine!" That is the faith into which we were all baptized – the faith that recognizes what Rev. Matrau called the "truth old as the human soul... the want of our nature ever new and ever present – communion with God." For what God speaks through Isaiah and through the voice at Jesus's baptism is the truth that we *are* the Beloved of God." Our faith, then, is about relationship – with God and with one another.

In these days, when we work together at discerning who we are as the community of St. John's today, and who will best lead us into becoming more of who God calls us to be, let the continued growth of that relationship with God and with one another be our focus.

There is a line in the Gospel I want to look at. "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His (the Spirit's) winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." I think those sentences are often taken as descriptive of judgment, especially that last line: "the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." But I think, rather, that they are descriptive of the Spirit of love and discernment. There is a poem by little-known English poet Dinah Marie Mullock-Craik. She says this:

"Oh, the comfort — the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person — having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but pouring them all right out, just as they are, chaff and grain together; certain that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and then with the breath of kindness blow the rest away."

The history of St. John's – and our relationships with one another – are full of chaff and grain together. But we are safe with the Spirit. Our God has been with us through the rivers and the fire. And the spirit will help with the sifting – The spirit will keep what is worth keeping, and with a breath of kindness, blow the rest away. The Spirit will continue to strengthen us to be faithful to our baptismal covenant – so that we can continue to carry out our mission to bring all things into union in Christ.

As former rector Rev. John Goodrow wrote in his “historical resume” of St John's, called *Where Saints Have Trod*:
“The history of this parish does not stop with the dedication of its church by Bishop Gillespie, or its closing in the Great Depression of the 1920s, or with a new pipe organ, or a new priest, or an old one for that matter. The faithful come and they go, and each contributes in his or her way to the Kingdom of Jesus Christ our Lord here in St. John's Church of Mt. Pleasant. And for that we give thanks and we rejoice.”

As we celebrate this day, let us rest in the assurance of Psalm 29: “The Lord shall give strength to his people; * the Lord shall give his people the blessing of peace.”

May it be so.

Amen.

- [Isaiah 43:1-7](#)
- [Acts 8:14-17](#)
- [Luke 3:15-17, 21-22](#)
- [Psalm 29](#)