

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

“Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel...”

Today Annalisa Marie and I are sharing something that will never happen again. She is being baptized, and she is the first person I am baptizing as an Episcopal priest. Lest that make anyone anxious, Annalisa and I will get through this together, and the rest of you are on your own!

When we celebrate baptism as part of our Sunday worship, we use the Scripture readings assigned for the day, and the Spirit has been generous today in giving us readings that actually fit this gift and mystery we are celebrating.

In this morning’s first reading from Joshua, we have a description, I think, of at least part of what is going on here today. Joshua gathers all the people – and here we are all gathered. That is important for our reflection on baptism today. In times past, baptisms were celebrated “privately.” The family came to church, often on a Saturday morning, and the priest or deacon baptized the child, and maybe there was a party at home. The end. The baptismal rite had really changed very little from Thomas Cranmer’s 1552 Book of Common Prayer – yes, 1552 – until our current Book of Common Prayer from 1979. The emphasis of the sacramental action then was that of “washing away” sin. Many of us were taught that without being baptized, you could not “get into heaven!” And even once you were baptized as an infant, you weren’t a *full* member of the church until you were confirmed. For years, one was not admitted to *communion* until you had been confirmed.

But our understanding grows, thanks be to God. Our understanding of *God* changes and grows. And so in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, which we use today, baptism is a celebration of *full* initiation into the Body of Christ. Baptism marks our entry into a covenant, a relationship, with God. We do it *with* everyone gathered – the whole people of God – at our primary Sunday celebration. We are all involved here.

So in some ways, we are mirroring that reading from Joshua. We are all gathered, and we will recall, in the blessing of the water, in our Eucharistic prayer, all that God has done for us. We will see, in the faces of those around us, and in our memories of those no longer physically present, the tradition of faithfulness. And we will, like all the tribes of Israel Joshua had gathered, proclaim our choice: We will follow the Lord.

What we *don't* hear in the passage we have from Joshua is what comes after that affirmation. Joshua tells the Israelites that they won't be faithful, that they will end up following other gods, even though they insist otherwise. Including those verses would have inserted a real "downer" to an otherwise inspiring reading. But I add that part here because it is real. We will make some hefty promises when we renew and profess, with Annalisa Marie and her parents and godparents, our baptismal covenant. And even as we speak those promises, we know we have not lived them fully since the first time we spoke them. That is real. We live in that real space between our hearts that can acclaim, "We will follow the Lord," and our fear that says, with the disciples in today's Gospel, "This teaching is difficult, who can accept it?"

In the Gospel passage we heard this morning, we want to see ourselves as part of "the twelve" – who, with Peter as their spokesperson, say to Jesus, "We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." We, in fact, gather here this morning to affirm that belief. But remember that Peter later denies he even knows Jesus, and only one of the twelve sticks around at the cross. We are *all* of the people in the story – the ones saying, "Who can accept it?" – the ones who walk away – and the ones who stay, because, "Lord, to whom can we go?" And sometimes it is only the faith of others that can bear us up when *we* feel most like walking away.

We don't gather today to welcome Annalisa into a club that has all the answers. We don't gather here today to issue magic tickets to heaven, wherever that might be. We gather because we have come to believe that in Jesus the Christ, God revealed Godself to us – and we choose to acknowledge the good news that he preached: That the kingdom of God, the God life, is here among us and within us, each of us individually, and all of us as a community, as the Body of Christ.

We are a motley crew, following – as best we can from day to day – the Light of Christ that penetrates the darkness which sometimes seems to surround us. We walk together, helping one another keep that Light burning.

The Book of Common Prayer tells us this: “Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ’s Body the Church. The bond which God established in Baptism is indissoluble.” We celebrate then, in some sense, what we already know: Annalisa Marie is a child of God, and today we celebrate her as *our* child of God. When I walk through your midst with her at the Peace, welcome her – sign her with the cross that acknowledges her, too, as part of the Body of Christ.

This is the faith, the tradition, the belief and the family into which we welcome Annalisa Marie this morning.

Amen.

[Joshua 24:1-2a,14-18](#)

[Psalm 34:15-22](#)

[Ephesians 6:10-20](#)

[John 6:56-69](#)