

Baptism as a Beginning

Acts 9:1-6, (7-20)

Revelation 5:11-14

John 21:1-19

Psalm 30

This morning as I was driving, I saw a herd of very wet cows grazing in a field. As I drove past them, one black cow turned to look at me, and her head was completely covered and dripping with brown mud. Apparently her head was itchy. By the time I saw her, she had moved to scratch on a post, but it made me laugh to see her. It reminded me of how messy life is. It is spring, the season of new life. Perhaps you've seen the foals and calves popping up on the hillsides? Colt had a baby born this week, little Utah, so cute! There is nothing better than watching babies come into the world and grow from awkward and stumbling, into confident and strong youths. Earlier in the week I drove past a pasture where two large, grown bulls, were playing together in a field. Massive animals, lumbering around in delight. It made my heart so happy. Life is a beautiful thing. It starts so small and fragile and yet it grows and changes so profoundly. Even if you're not a person who appreciates livestock, we all know the joy of watching youngsters develop. And we all know that even when we grow fully into our dignity, at times we end up with mud our heads. Life is messy, development is difficult. And it is a beautiful gift.

Today we are celebrating Baptism, which is one of only two sacraments in The Episcopal Church. Baptism is understood as the entrance point of life with God in Christ. It is the full initiation in-to Christ's body. The second sacrament, The Eucharist, is our ongoing participation with that same body. Through the Eucharist we feed on Christ and then live his life in the world. Both sacraments do not magically change anything. Rather, they are outward and visible signs of the grace God is working inside of us. Baptism is a sacred mystery in which we are buried with Christ in his death and raised with him in-to new life. And as is true of the beginnings of all new life, it is merely the starting point of a lifelong transformation.

In Baptism, as the water is poured and the Spirit is invoked, we witness nothing less than a miracle: the beginning of a lifelong conversion. As lovely as it would be to believe that the waters of baptism which cleanse our sin, will protect us from any future sin, we all know the truth about transformation. It is as beautiful as it is messy.

Today in our reading from Acts, Saul is breathing out threats and murder. He is a man on a mission to stamp out this new movement of Jesus-followers. He is doing what he believes is right and good, to protect the faith he understands, but he is a human man, flawed but trying, on the edge of his own entrance into transformation. On the road to Damascus, he is knocked to the ground, struck blind, and confronted by the risen Christ. And then, in the hands of Ananias, Saul is healed, baptized, and becomes Paul — the apostle to the Gentiles. We would not be standing here today if it weren't for his willingness to step into transformation.

Then, in John's gospel account, the disciples have gone fishing, perhaps returning to the familiar because they're unsure what's next. Peter, in particular, must have been carrying enormous weight from his denial of Jesus. When in this tender and striking encounter on the shore, the risen Jesus meets all of them with breakfast and restoration. Rather than allowing Peter to continue brooding on his failure, Jesus beckons him to become the one who would care for Jesus's own sheep.

From persecutor to preacher, from denier to shepherd, both Saul and Peter are brought into new life, transformed life, they both become the Pillars of the Church — not because of their qualifications, but because God is in the business of calling the unworthy, forgiving the broken, and sending the unlikely.

This is the gospel...this is the root of baptism. It is the radical reorientation of the self — a death and a rebirth, a starting place, a commissioning to follow Christ, wherever he may lead. Whether our transformation is sudden like Saul's or slow and aching like Peter's, the

path of the baptized is a path of ongoing conversion...development, growth, stumbling, and succeeding.

When Bishop Gulick is here, he loves to talk about our font. This font has eight sides. In Scripture, seven is the number of perfection. Creation was completed on the seventh day. The eighth side of our font illustrates the first day of new life in Christ, a starting place, fresh and full of possibility. It represents both a tomb and a womb. It is at the font that we die to our old selves and are adopted into the family of God, reborn, resurrected.

Baptism is merely a beginning, but it is in and through our baptism that we find fullness of life and fulfillment of purpose at each new stage. In baptism, we're not simply celebrating a rite of passage. We are affirming that God still meets people on dusty roads and quiet shorelines. God still breaks through our arrogant rages and our insecure navel-gazing. God still speaks our names. God still turns our lives around.

And baptism is never a solitary act. In both stories today, transformation happens in community. Saul needs Ananias, the faithful disciple who hesitantly but obediently lays hands on his enemy. Peter needs the companionship of his fellow disciples and the restoring voice of Christ. The baptized need the Church. And the church is in desperate need of the baptized. We need one another.

Because after the water, after the Spirit, comes the call: Jesus says to Peter, "Follow me". He says to Saul, "Get up and go". He has a purpose for each of us and that purpose includes a lifetime of change, a lifetime of transformation. And we need one another to live a life of faithfulness to that call.

One day we will stand with all creatures in heaven and earth and under the earth, before the throne in worship, one day all our stumbling and straining will conclude, and we will all sing together in full voice, worthy is the lamb!

Until that day, as we baptize into the death and resurrection of Christ, we are reminded that every one of us is called — called to grow, to feed, to witness, to serve, and to love.

May none of us leave this font unchanged. May we remember that we too were once washed, sealed, and sent. And whether we are new to the faith or seasoned in the journey, may none of us remain unaltered. Jesus still asks each of us, as he asked Peter: “Do you love me?” May we answer — again and again — “Yes, Lord.” And may we follow him — from the shore to the road, from the water in-to the world.