Renewing Our Vows - With God’s Help

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

January 7, 2024 ~ Mark 1:4-11 & Acts 19:1-7

If you are ever so fortunate as to visit Dharamsala, home of the Dalai Lama in exile, all about the temple compound, in hallways, on balconies, you will see saffron-robed, shaved-headed monks arguing, ferociously! With arm-waving, finger-pointing, foot-stomping emphasis the monks debate the truths of the Buddha’s teaching.

For millennia, Jewish rabbis have studied and written midrash, interpretation of the biblical texts that are added to and stand alongside the original texts, deepening the inquiry, illuminating potential truths that lie therein.

To the average observer, religious teaching is often viewed as monolithic, unchanging. In truth, religious beliefs, practices are ever alive, varying, responsive.

In the Episcopal Church, we engage this collectively as we shape our worship. Since the beginning of Anglicanism, the Church of England in the early 1500’s, we have centered ourselves in Common Prayer. This, what we are doing right now, gathering, hearing the texts in light of the world and the day’s events, offering prayers, singing praise, giving generously from our own livelihood, sharing in the body of Christ, being fed and sent. Since the beginning, we have gathered for common prayer, accessible to all, and wrestled in search of truth. Since the beginning, our prayers have been changing, ever interpreted anew.

In our church calendar, we celebrate the feast of the Baptism of our Lord, the baptism of Jesus by John. In our secular calendar, we celebrate the start of a new year. I am going to do a quick run-through of a few elements in our baptismal rite as a way to illumine changes that have occurred, in my lifetime, that reflect new understandings. And I am going to invite you to renew your commitment to the baptismal covenant as we embark on this new year.

This may sound churchy, and nerdy. Maybe it is. But the world is in a precarious place these days. You don’t need me to recount the areas of trouble and angst. I believe deeply that each of us has been blessed by God, that we may be a blessing to the world, to be bearers of God’s light and grace, individually, collectively, however much we may feel ourselves lacking. Thus, it matters how we center ourselves week in and week out, day after day, in prayer and in practice. This (-) is not normal; this is radical. Few things speak to this as compellingly as our baptismal vows.

You don’t need to, but if you wish, you will find the service of Holy Baptism in the red Book of Common Prayer, on page 298. If you are with us online and don’t have a Prayer Book handy, you can go to bcponline.org and scroll through the table of contents. This most recent edition dates to 1979. There have been many revisions since the first one in England in 1549 and in the United States in 1789.

First up, the opening rubric, page 298, “Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's Body the Church.” Straightforward enough. The church understands full initiation to mean, once baptized, you are all in. This is the basis on which we now offer Holy Communion even to the youngest among us. When I was coming up, I had to be confirmed before receiving communion, the idea being that one needed to understand the sacraments before participating. In this simple rubric we have reversed the earlier understanding and affirmed that the efficacy of the sacraments does not depend on our understanding thereof. The sacraments work at a level deeper than our intellect can grasp. To see the truth of this, all we need do is look at the little children who come tearing forward to receive. They know there is a feast at hand and they want in on it.

Taking this further, at St. Columba’s, our invitation is, “Whoever you are, wherever you find yourself on the journey of faith you are welcome at Christ’s table.” Many have shared how deeply this invitation stirred in their heart, opening a way in which they had not previously experienced. I am glad. And, I confess that our invitation is not consistent with current church teaching since we do not specifically require baptism first. Only by the grace of our bishop who herself extends this invitation when here, the church police have yet to cart me away. This is a live debate. We believe our practice should reflect the ever-widening inclusion and embrace seen in Jesus’ own life and teaching. We also contend that rites of initiation are essential. So, where is the line? Is there a line? Stay tuned.

To be clear, the rite is not only important sociologically, as a means of entrance into the community of the faithful. This is a sacrament, defined as an “outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.” We believe and proclaim that we are changed through baptism. In that water, we receive the gifts of God’s forgiveness, the promise of eternal life, and the power of the Holy Spirit. We receive from God the affirmation first proclaimed for Jesus, “you are my beloved; with you I am well pleased!” Sha-zam!

As Paul addressed, we receive not only a baptism of repentance which frees us *from* our past, we also receive a baptism of the Spirit which frees us *for* new life.

In the earlier Prayer Book, revised in 1928, the priest said a concluding prayer that the person baptized, (quote) “shall not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified, and [shall] manfully fight under his banner, against sin, the world, and the devil; and to continue Christ’s faithful soldier and servant unto hislife’s end.” Whew! What did this prayer say of the world and our place in it? That it is a place of sin and the devil against which one must fight – manfully, no less!

In today’s revision, that prayer, page 308, concludes, “Sustain them, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, the gift of joy and wonder in all your works.” Now, we are sent out with joy, wonder to inquire, explore.

If you look in the bulletin at the specific vows in the baptismal covenant that we will renew today, we have included a vow, as authorized by the church – not found in the Prayer Book. “Will you cherish the wondrous works of God, and protect the beauty and integrity of all creation?” This reflects the church’s too recent awakening to our essential role as stewards of creation, also seen in the church’s new season of creation. As with all revisions, the church rarely simply adds something entirely new. Rather, we return to our scriptures, the teachings of the past, to integrate, pull forward, and find that of course, the glory of God’s creation and our charge to honor that creation has been present since the beginning.

I digress from baptism, but want to say that a similar desire prompts our observance in coming weeks of the “Womanist Lectionary.” We’ll recover scriptural readings centered in the experience of women, specifically women of color. None of it is new; we draw forth what was previously not seen, omitted from our liturgical diet.

Now: the baptismal vows which we’re all going to renew. The first three petitions that begin “I believe” are the words of the Apostle’s Creed. The next six, “will you continue? persevere? proclaim?” invite us, commit us, to put our faith into action. If you want a roadmap of the Christian life, of what it looks like to live God’s love, there is no more succinct statement than this.

In these six weeks of Epiphany, in which we are invited to see and name Christ’s light in the world, I invite you to take one petition each week as the center, the focus of your own prayer. Ask yourself “how?” Better yet, ask God. “God, how shall I proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?” What step will I take this week? With whom? “How shall I seek and serve Christ…?”

The six – to continue in faithful practice; to resist evil and repent when we fail; to proclaim and share; to care for creation; to seek and serve Christ in all persons most especially those who differ; and to strive for justice – how might these focus the intentions of our hearts, the decisions and actions of our lives?

To this, let us say, Amen: I will with God’s help.