

Baptism

Sermon Series: "Episcopal Worship and More; Why do we do what we do?"

Sermon preached at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

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This morning we welcome twins Emily Rose and Isabella Ann into the family of faith. So it makes sense that we conclude our sermon series on "why we do what we do as Episcopalians" with a conversation about Baptism.

Last week we took a deep dive into the formation of the Book of Common Prayer, and considered where we are now in that process of liturgical formation. Which is both how liturgy is formed, and **how it forms us**. The 1979 Book of Common Prayer reframed our liturgical text so that Baptism and the Eucharist become the core of the prayer book, as these two sacraments are the core of our faith.

Recall that one of the four principles of Anglican worship is that it be: "agreeable to the practice of the Ancient Church."¹ So, a very quick look at the historic roots of baptism. It took a little time for baptismal practices to take on a consistent shape. But by the 4th century, baptism had a three-fold form: 1) baptism with water, 2) the imposition of hands with anointing, and 3) baptism was followed by the Eucharist.

As Archbishop Thomas Cranmer developed a prayer book in the mid 1500s for what becomes the Anglican Church of England, he re-framed the early Latin Baptismal rites, so they took on a much more Protestant perspective. The Episcopal Church inherited that framing of baptism from the Church of England and maintained it until the 1979 Prayer Book.

When, our entire perspective on baptism shifts. Rather than being focused on washing us from sin, this prayer book emphasizes baptism as full entry into the church, into the discipleship of Jesus. It also shifts our understanding of the rite, from a private, personal event, to a public celebration in community. The 1979 prayer book is clear - ministry belongs to all the baptized. Our liturgy and rites require the active participation of the whole people of God.

Through baptism, we become full members of the Body of Christ. Once we are baptized, nothing can take that away from us. We will always be a member of Christ's body, and a member of the community of the faithful. As it states in the prayer book: "Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's Body the Church."²

The 1979 prayer book makes two other major changes as well - re-instating the laying on of hands and anointing after the baptism, and placing Baptism firmly into a Eucharistic celebration. The three-fold initiation rite of the fourth century church is reclaimed in our current Baptismal rite.

But wait, there's more.

The framers of the 1979 prayer book include a new structural unit - that of the Baptismal Covenant. Remember, our understanding of Baptism has now shifted away from the medieval church's understanding of it as "celestial fire insurance" (focused mainly on keeping the baby from going to hell). We retain the renunciations and affirmations of our tradition, but we now understand baptism to be about discipleship. In addition to renouncing evil and turning to God - we make promises to God and one another about how we will live out our faith. And we do this together, at every baptism in this community.

Using a form of the Apostle's creed, which is the historic baptismal creed of the church, we proclaim the faith of the church, as we answer the questions: "Do you believe in God the Father? Do you believe in God the Son? Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?"

And after our recital of the Apostle's Creed, we recommit ourselves to living out our faith in our daily lives, answering questions that clearly state what that looks like in word and deed. Because Baptism is primarily about discipleship, at every celebration of baptism, we recommit ourselves to walking in the ways of Jesus, as we affirm our faith with the Baptismal promises that follow the creed.

The first promise asks about our participation in the sacramental life of the church. As we mentioned last week, we are Anglican because we worship together. The Christian faith is lived out corporately, as part of a worshipping community. The second promise asks us to persist in resisting evil, and it acknowledges that we will sin. The question is about what we do in response to that eventuality. Then we are asked to proclaim the gospel in word and action.

And finally, there are promises addressing the social implications of our discipleship. The first of these asks if we will seek and serve Christ in all persons, as we love our neighbors as ourselves. Emphasizing our equal treatment of all people. Which leads us to the follow up question - asking us to strive for justice and peace, as we respect the dignity of every human being. Pointing out that baptismal faith is one of action, combating systemic injustice, on behalf of every human being.³

The final promise is recent, and its inclusion is optional. It acknowledges our responsibility to Creation, which is part of living into the body of Christ. The version of the promise we are currently using is drawn from the Diocese of Connecticut's proposal to General Convention in 2015.⁴ The most recent General Convention approved a resolution calling for "Experimental Creation Care Language for the Baptismal Covenant."⁵ Our bishop was one of the two endorsing bishops of this resolution. Because how we pray matters.

I honestly believe that these Baptismal promises have done more to shape The Episcopal Church than possibly anything else we've done in last 45 years. Because how we worship shapes how we see ourselves and the world. We now know, deep in our bones, that as baptized Christians we are called to seek and serve Christ in all persons, and to stand up for all who are oppressed. Through these promises we have become a church which truly welcomes and includes all people, and respects the dignity of every human being. We have been shaped into

communities which stand up for those who are marginalized, oppressed, and in need of our voice and action. With our Baptismal Covenant we proclaim - **this** is what it means to be members of Christ's body in the world, as an institution, and as individuals.

As we said when we began, we shape our liturgy over the course of generations, and **it shapes us**. Because how we pray shapes what we believe, and how we understand what it looks like to walk in the ways of Jesus, **together**. This was never meant to be a private journey - because we don't live singular, isolated lives. We live and move and have our being in **community**, and we live out our faith in community as well.

Friends, today we will baptize Emily Rose and Isabella Ann into the Body of Christ, and we will remember our own baptisms, and recommit ourselves to God and one another. As we know all too well, in this day and age, baptism isn't something commonplace that everyone does because it's the "done thing." Baptism is a radical, hopeful, faith-filled investment in the lives of these children, and, in making that choice, in the life of the community of Christ.

Because Baptism works in both directions. It effects a transformation that changes a person, and it changes the Body of Christ forever. When we baptize these girls and mark them as Christ's own forever - they become part of the body. And with every baptism, the body of the faithful is strengthened and enhanced.

Beloved, may we be restored, transformed, and renewed, in faith and community, together.
Amen.

¹ J. Neil Alexander, "Embrace the Happy Occasion: Prayer Book Revision in Light of Yesterday's Principles, Today's Questions, and Tomorrow's Possibilities," in *Leaps and Bounds: The Prayer Book in the 21st Century*, Paul V. Marshall and Lesley A. Northup, editors, (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 1997), 187.

² Book of Common Prayer 1979, page 298.

³ James Turrell, *Celebrating the Rites of Initiation*, Church Publishing, New York 2013. See Chapter One: The Ethos of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer.

Also consulted: Patrick Malloy, *Celebrating the Eucharist*, Church Publishing, New York, 2007

⁴ The Episcopal Church in Connecticut, <https://www.episcopalct.org/liturgy-music/authorized-liturgical-resources/entry/5146/>

⁵ Resolution B001-2024; Virtual binder, of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church: legislation.generalconvention.org/vbinder/resolutions/642/finalization