

<i>Date Preached</i>	11-Jul-2021 10:30	<i>Date Initiated</i>	22-Jun-2021
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Prop 10, Yr B (w/HB)

" [God] destined us for adoption as [God's] children, through Jesus Christ "



When to schedule a baptism is, I suppose, always something of a dance. The Prayer Book sets forth some liturgical recommendations* that must be considered. The parish's local calendar needs to be taken into account. And, of course, the availability of the candidate's family members to travel and be present for her is of utmost importance. What can be overlooked in all of this—especially by a newbie priest like me—are the propers of the day: the prayers and readings appointed for each particular Sunday.† Are they appropriate for baptism? Are they sacramentally oriented? Do they speak to (or toward) the magnanimous grace of God in Christ?

As I began reviewing the lessons for today, having already set this date with Maddie's parents Aimee and Nick many weeks *before*, I grew *slightly* concerned as I read the account of King David's return of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem: a joyous act of love and devotion, to be sure, but I think I'd need a shoehorn to squeeze it into a baptismal sermon. And then my heart sank as I read today's gospel reading: not just one of the most 'PG-13' stories in all of the New Testament, but also the death of the very saint who *initiated* the Christian tradition of baptism. Why, I despaired, hadn't I looked at these readings *before* we settled on a date for Maddie's big day?!

But finally, I turned to the epistle lesson, and my spirit leapt inside me a little. For while baptism is not the subject of this introduction to the letter to the Ephesians, in it I heard and saw a wonderful explanation of the two-fold ... the *bi-level*, if you will ... nature of this most sacred rite of Christian initiation. These opening words are a perfect juxtaposition of, on the one hand, the cosmic and universal acts and will of God for the entire world ... and, on the other hand, the most personal and intimate bestowal of God's grace on each and every one of us, individually.

In the first part of our epistle lesson—and by the way, in the original, all the words we heard today comprised one single sentence; thank heavens for modern editing—we get a mediation ... even a hymn ... on the complete and selfless opening of Godself and salvation of humanity that God has gifted us, in love:

* Essentially, it is recommended, for both theological and liturgical reasons, that Holy Baptism be reserved for four occasions during the year (the Great Vigil of Easter, the Day of Pentecost, All Saints' Day and the Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ), as well as for a bishop's visitation. Because I am new at St Andrew's, I have not highlighted this recommendation, although I intend to do so. At the same time, the timing of these occasions leaves a five- or six-month lacuna when baptisms could not occur, so a bit of pastoral grace should be applied here, as well.

† Theoretically, at Holy Baptism, the Celebrant can, "for sufficient reason" (BCP, p 312), substitute generic readings that the BCP appoints for *any* baptism for the specific readings assigned to a given Sunday. But to do so seems (to me, at least) to ignore the fact that the candidate is being accepted into the membership of the fuller, wider church: that she is adapting her life to the patterns and rhythms of the corporate existence of the Body of Christ, and is not, via her entry, in any way disrupting or 'un-norming' them—for example, by departing from the lessons that all other parishes are hearing this day.

- God has chosen us, in Christ, to be holy and blameless before God ... and did so before God had even created the world
- God, in the "pleasure of [God's] good will," has made it our destiny to be adopted as God's own children: the sisters and brothers of Christ
- In Christ ... in an exquisite sharing and sacrifice of divine grace ... God has lavished upon us forgiveness of all our sins and our total redemption: our full-and-forever relationship with God
- And God, in all wisdom and insight, has revealed to us the mystery of God's will: that, in the fullness of time, God will draw the whole world unto Godself, in Christ

As Christians ... as members of Christ's one holy Church ... we are blessed with a shockingly complete grasp of God's shockingly simple ultimate desire: that all creatures live in eternal union with God, in the love of Christ.

Now, if this wonderful 'insider knowledge' of God's heart were just academic ... if we had no way of actually *being united* with God ... it would be like the fruit of Tantalus: desperately desired but always just beyond our reach. But—blessing-upon-blessing—we've also been given the means to *achieve* eternal union with Our God. For this is the reason Jesus ordained the Sacrament of Holy Baptism.

For in this simple-and-yet-most-profound water bath, we are transformed, in an instant, from being bereft orphans, adrift in this broken world ... into being the full, sure children of God, forever seated at the heavenly table: the very heirs of God's Kingdom. In symbolically drowning in ... and then rising again from ... the waters of the Font, with Christ, we make our irreversible, once-and-for-all exodus from the cold, selfish and cramped strictures of only-human existence ... into the bright, boundless and unlimited life-and-love of God. And having made that journey of a few physical inches and an infinite spiritual distance, we are then sealed by the Holy Spirit: We are marked—branded; indelibly proclaimed, by the laying on of hands and a cross marked in Holy Chrism—as Christ's own, forever; and we are wrapped in the impenetrable armor of God's love and mercy that will never fail, whatever battles we may face; whatever foes—human or otherwise—we may encounter. And at the Last Day, this mark will be the token that we are God's own people, destined to enjoy life and peace and fulfillment with God, in Christ, through the power of the Spirit, all for eternity. Ours is a *Holy* Baptism, indeed!

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Perhaps little more need be said about this sublime and transcendent sacrament, but ... just to round out our understanding ... I'd like to offer the following three thoughts, perhaps as something of a 'coda':

First, while Baptism ends the journey of our *becoming* Christians—it, alone, makes us Christ's own, forever—it also *begins* our journey *as* Christians: as disciples of Jesus. Baptism is an undertaking, and not a status. We are not baptized into a life of spiritual ease and security, assured of our salvation and absolved from the evils and inadequacies of this world. No, having been incorporated into Christ's divinity, we are also coöpted into Jesus' servanthood: The pathway from

the Font leads directly to the soup kitchen, the prison, the shelter, the bedside and the grieving ... precisely to the people Jesus chose to surround Himself with.

Second, for all that we gain in baptism—and its consequences are literally infinite—baptism also entails loss. The decision to be baptized (whether we make it ourselves or our parents make it for us) is always also surrender: We lay aside the world's false ideal of self-as-ultimate ... that, in the end, I care about and answer to only myself ... and take up Jesus' dual ideals of self-*in*-God and self-*for*-other.

And finally, we must celebrate the joy and gladness of baptism as every Christian's homecoming. For in this simple, humble water bath and smudge of oil, through the Holy Spirit, the merciful grace and loving will of God come to dwell in us, forever. We are completed and liberated, united and blessed. We are welcomed fully home—heart and soul and entire being—into the arms of Christ that He has been stretching out to us—each and every one of us—from the very beginning of time ... and we are wrapped in an embrace that will never be broken.

And so, dear Maddie, welcome home. Welcome into the loving arms of Jesus, forever and ever.



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