

14 August 2022

Proper 15C

Church of the Holy Trinity, Middletown

Good morning! My name is Maggie Breen and I am your NC Region Missionary. I also serve as the North East Region Missionary, which means I serve 50 parishes and worshipping communities across about one-third of the state.

I am so excited to be with you today. I'm excited to participate in worship with you and to celebrate the beauty and wonder of baptism. I am especially excited to stand here and share some thoughts with you and invite you to join me after the service for more conversation.

Today our second reading comes from a letter written to a community of Jewish Christ followers. The author, who is either Barnabas or Apollos depending on who you are talking to, is writing to a community who needs a little help in remembering the life and work of Jesus. Now, this Hebrew community might have been comprised primarily of Jewish converts, but regardless the people were familiar with Jewish scriptures. The bulk of our selection in the letter to the Hebrews is a litany of Jewish heroes – the original listeners would have needed no education on who these people were or what their stories were about. What the author is doing is capitalizing on their shared religious history while moving it forward. He says remember these people and their trials and tribulations. Remember, too, that we will suffer trials and tribulations. Being a people beloved of God does not mean we won't have to deal with hard things. It would be great if that's what it meant, but it's not. Being a people beloved by God means we don't face hard things alone.

This letter was written to remind the community that their daily practice of living a Christ-centered life is like running a marathon or doing one of those puzzles that has no edge pieces and comes with extra pieces just to annoy you. Living a Christ-centered life required endurance, practice, patience, and hope.

On any given Sunday, you come to this church and remember the story of Jesus. We celebrate the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus in our liturgy, our music, our prayers, and in the Eucharist. The next six days of the week we do our best to live the way Jesus asks us to live – with eyes focused on our Creator and meaningful loving-kindness to our neighbors. Our religious history, our stories, help us to do this work.

And, from time to time, we have the opportunity to recall exactly what it means to profess to be a Christ follower. Today is such a day, as we welcome Antiny to the family of Holy Trinity here in Middletown and the broader family of God's beloved across the world. Not only will we witness Antiny making a commitment to be a follower of Jesus, but we ourselves agree to be with him; to help and support him.

So here is the meat of my sermon for you today. The three reasons why baptisms are the best things ever.

1. A baptism is a declaration and a choice. Often we experience baptisms as parents making the choice on behalf of their child. Today we celebrate Antiny, an adult making this choice for himself. It's a powerful thing to watch someone claim for themselves the status of beloved child of God in all of our imperfect humanity.

2. We are in the unique position, as the congregation, to not only witness this baptism but to declare that we will take an active role in supporting Antiny in his life in Christ. Then, after we robustly affirm that we will support him, we re-remember and affirm our own baptismal promises. We answer each question with “I will, with God’s help” which means that we will try our best to do what God calls us to do while acknowledging that God is an equal participant in this work.
3. Lastly, we pray and witness someone – Antiny – being symbolically bathed in the living water of the Holy Spirit and watch as he is sealed as God’s own, forever. And, if you are like me, perhaps you have a kind of body remembrance of your own baptism – the moment when you were marked with God’s seal, forever a cherished and beloved creation.

I was two years old when I was baptized and so I don’t remember it. But each time I witness a baptism something happens in me. Something that I cannot describe – it’s a kind of knowing – an awareness that I am never apart from God. That even if I never came to church again, I would not be separated from God. And it’s knowing that the people who reaffirmed their baptismal promises in 1984 on my baptism day, have been part of the great cloud of witnesses that have raised me up to be who I am.

Antiny, welcome. Today is a big day and you are not alone. We, the people present here at Holy Trinity, are with you. We are here to walk beside you, to share our stories with you, and to help you always remember that you are beloved and cherished by God – the Creator of all things. But more importantly, you are sealed into God’s family – never to be separated.

Today is a day of joy! Today is the outward recognition of an internal choice. We are baptized just once because that is all we need. And, even though our sacramental acceptance is a one-and-done thing, our choice to follow Jesus is a choice we make every day. We will face hardships and challenges.

The key, my friends, is to remember that we are not alone. As the writer of Hebrews tells us, our scriptures are full of people facing challenges with a variety of outcomes. Remember that the people in our scriptures are ordinary people, like you and me. But not alone. God’s people don’t exist in a vacuum. We have each other – ready made communities of people just doing our best to follow God.

So Antiny, welcome to the beautiful and complicated family of God. Today we pledge to walk beside you in your journey and welcome your company on our journeys. Amen.