

# SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

## BAPTIZED INTO FAITH Hebrews 11:29-12:2

In our study of the lesson from the Letter to the Hebrews last week, we concluded that faith is based on a promise. In fact, faith is enacted when life is lived in a manner in which what is promised is believed to be the present reality. Furthermore, the substance of what is promised, and therefore, our faith is Jesus Christ; not only crucified, resurrected and ascended, but also returned. Then we can say that Jesus is the promise enacted.

Do you remember the promise God gave Israel, and through Israel the Church? If we look back in the Book of Exodus, we find that God promised Israel that he would be their God and they would be his people, and that he would dwell among them (Exodus 6:7, 29:45). God the Son, through the Incarnation, staked God's claim on all who believe and not only dwelt among them in Palestine, but subsequently sent the Holy Spirit to dwell with us even today, and has promised to dwell among us for eternity when he returns again in glory.

So, if Jesus is the embodiment of the promise which is the substance of our faith, then if we are to live the life of faith we must follow Jesus. The question then is what did Jesus do? For the answer let's look at Philippians 2 (:1-8).

*<sup>1</sup>If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, <sup>2</sup>make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup>Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup>Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,*

*<sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,*

*<sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,*

*<sup>8</sup> he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.*

Through the Incarnation, the Son of God emptied himself of his rightful status as the immortal and sovereign God and humbled himself to be obedient and die so that the nature and will of God might be made known to the world. If we are to follow Jesus, we must take this path of humility

and obedience. And just as Baptism marked the beginning of Jesus' ministry on earth, so too it marks the beginning of our journey of obedience.

Baptism is the symbol of our birth into the people of the promise. This cloud of witnesses is the community of expectation: the expectation that Jesus will return; the expectation that God will dwell with his people; and the expectation that the Holy Spirit will empower us to live as new creations.

It is this last expectation that I want us to think about today – the expectation that we can be transformed into and live as new creations. Through Baptism we proclaim that we are no longer living as individuals against the world or lone rangers in the wilderness, but as members of a community on pilgrimage into the perfect presence of God. As pilgrims we learn from each other, are oriented and reoriented by one another, and we are encouraged by each other. Therefore, in the liturgy of Baptism, the parents and godparents are asked:

*Will you be responsible for seeing that the child you present is brought up in the Christian faith and life?*

*Will you by your prayers and witness help this child to grow into the full stature of Christ?*

And then they are asked to affirm a list of behaviors that they will model for the newly baptized.

In addition, the whole congregation affirms that they will do all in their power to support the newly baptized in their life in Christ. And then, our first act on their behalf is to join them in renewing our own baptismal covenant.

Finally, after the prayers and the water, we welcome the newly baptized saying:

*We receive you into the household of God. Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood.*

So, in Baptism, we are placed in the middle of a great cloud of witnesses – those who witness to the power of Jesus to reconcile us to God – those who model the life of obedience to God – and those who encourage us by cheering our progress along the way.

In the race that is the Christian life, Baptism is the first strong stride out of the starting blocks. As a champion runner never looks back or thinks about things that were prior to the sound of the gun, we are to abandon the cumbersome and sinful ways of our pre-Baptism lives and look forward to the finish line, all the while being urged on by those who have gone before and those with whom we are now running.

The two totally dependent infants that we baptize today remind us that Baptism is the beginning of the race of our lives – the goal of which will take all our life and God's grace to accomplish. Also, they remind us that this race can only be successfully run in the community of fellow runners.

But, thanks be to God, for he has provided the Church – the community of faith to which he has promised that they would be his people and he would be their God, and dwell among us...forever.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, as you came among us and showed us how we are to live as the community of the promise, be with us now through the Holy Spirit and empower us to live such lives in community that the world may come to know you and become reconciled to the Father. Help us to serve each other in unity and peace so that the witness of our life will be an attractive contrast to those living outside the Church. May we be constantly reborn into your image every day of our lives. Amen.

*Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia on August 15, 2010, the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 15, Year C.*