

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

2 Epiphany
January 19, 2008
Fr. Bill McGinty

“Baptized in Faith”

Today we welcome Sean and his family to the church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist, where families have been gathering for 137 years to bring Baptism to their children. In all that time Moms and Dads have not changed in what their intentions have been. They have come before the Altar of the Lord in a holy place and said:

Dear God, Our Father, Here is the precious gift that you have given us of a child, a son. We could not be happier with this blessing. Now, we bring him before you and we pray: “Bless this child” consecrate him to you that you may protect him as you would your only son. Allow him to grow in health and strength. Protect him from all danger and from the evils of this world. Give him the gifts he needs to make his way in the world. Teach him right from wrong and give him the grace to choose the right and grow to be a good person. Help him to help others and whatever his road in life, be there for him as a compass and guide. Teach him love, that he may grow to his full potential and live a life that is full.”

137 years ago that was the wish of many good Christian men and women and it is our wish today for Sean and his life.

Yet all of us know that Baptism is much more, our Christian faith teaches us that Baptism marks us as belonging to the family of God and to be called to follow Jesus Christ as our Savior and teacher. Today Christ invites Sean to be a disciple. He says to him: “Come and see, the good thing God can do in your life. Walk the way of love and be a disciple of good.”

Today’s Gospel from St John is one of the most powerful readings in the New Testament. John the Baptist testifies to who Jesus is, he is the Messiah, the Holy One of God. John’s disciples immediately follow Jesus. He turns and asks them what do you seek? They say: “Master where do you live?” Back comes the reply: “Come and see.”

Baptism, asks the same question, where does Christ live in my life? Jesus tells us: “Come and see what I can bring to your life.”

“Come and see,” is an invitation to Jesus’ life and ministry. All of us who have responded to that invitation have a story to tell. It is our faith story. It is the moment that something about Jesus and his message first impacted our lives. It is one of those disclosure moments we remember. Just like our first day at school, the first time you met your husband or wife, your wedding day, the birth of your first child.

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Most people would remember those moments just as most people remember Dr King's "I have a dream speech" from the steps of the Capital building in Washington in 1963. Tomorrow being Dr. Martin Luther Day it reminds us all of the man.

I can remember thinking: "What drives this man? Where does he get his energy and his conviction? I remember thinking that he must have a powerful faith."

Martin Luther King's story has become a part of America's story. The dream he spoke of us still in the making. It forces us to think of our own story and what it is that drives us. That faith too, comes out when we meet moments in our life that desperately need it. We look to our faith for strength in times of adversity, stress, death, injury and sadness. It is a natural and good thing.. Faith can be our inner strength.

The popular magazine "Guideposts," tells stories every month of people experiencing tragedy, loss and serious illness who overcome great difficulty by clinging to a faith that even they did not know they possessed. Whether it was 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina, or the Virginia Tech shootings, people astound us and themselves, by their courage, resolve, and strength of character. And it is not just in times of national tragedy that we see this, but almost on a daily basis as people, we know, deal with serious illness.

The Jesus of the Gospels does not tell his followers that he will take away tragedy, loss, disease or injustice. He does not give them an out against pain or a way around death. But he does give them hope. He gives them hope because he re-unites them with their God. He awakens them to the fact that God is not remote, or impassive, but that God cares about what he has created. The God that Jesus teaches about is a Relational God. It is a God that can only think of us in terms of son or daughter. He is a God who speaks continuously to us if only we would turn on the sound.

There was once a woman named Charlotte who belonged to a church in Rockland, Maine. Her best friend Rachael came to her every week with all her woes. She complained about her job. The commute was too long. Her bosses did not understand. She felt she did a good job, but was not appreciated. She longed for a change or retirement but she had too much time invested, but not enough to retire. Her husband worked crazy hours and she rarely saw him. Her college son never phoned or came home.

Week upon week Charlotte listened, as good friends do. She never offered advice as the response was always: "I tried that, but it doesn't work." Often conversation between them lapsed into a long silence. Rachael was often heard to say: "I don't know why I bother with Charlotte, she never says anything and she's no help." One day, Rachael had had a particularly bad week and for two hours she sat in Charlotte's kitchen complaining. Charlotte listened attentively feeling sorry that Rachael really did have a poor quality of life. Still, she offered no advice. They went silent, until Rachael in desperation said: "How

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come it's always me? How come it's always me who things go wrong with? Why is it never you? Why don't you ever phone me up and tell me about your disastrous week? How come your life is so sweet?"

"It isn't," said Charlotte. "My life can get every bit as bad as yours. It is just that I have a safety net and you don't. I go to church."

Rachael laughed. "I tried that," she said, "it doesn't work. I thought that if I had a deeper spiritual life, I would feel more fulfilled, but churches are all the same. I just wasn't getting what I needed. I needed answers, I needed to feel better about myself, I needed peace within and inner strength to get passed the bad stuff. It never happened and I don't go anymore. Now you tell me that it's different today? Church doesn't give what you need."

Charlotte looked long and hard at Rachael without saying anything. Rachael got impatient with the long pause of her friend and she said: "Well?"

"Well what?" said Charlotte. "Everything you said is true. A church can't solve your problems or meet your needs."

"So why do you go?" said Rachael, "why do you go, if it's not doing anything for you. It's a waste of time."

"I didn't say it doesn't do anything for me," says Charlotte, "I just said I don't expect it to solve my problems. I go to church for a different reason. I go to church to worship my God and to learn the way of love that Jesus taught."

"Good for you," said Rachael sarcastically, "and how has it been working for you lately?"

"Pretty good," said Charlotte. "Last week, I knelt behind a woman called Carmine. She lost her husband six years ago. Last year she had cancer treatment. She is always so sweet and serene. Some days, I swear I can feel her depth of faith. That's Joan Pritchard two rows in front. She has three little boys. They are a handful. She would have loved a girl. She is always at church with them. The middle one is five and turns and makes faces at me. Lilly Evans sits in front of them. She is in the Altar Guild but her back pain won't let her do much anymore. I could go all around the church and tell you about each person and every couple. Everyone has something that's not quite right. I suppose in a way we could be described as God's misfits. But I feel attached to these people. Together we are the Body of Christ. They give me strength and together I believe our worship is worth something."

I still have the same worries when I come away, but it never seems to matter. I belong to something greater than myself. For me it is enough."

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Rachael wasn't convinced. The following week she was back with the same complaints.

Faith is a strange thing. Few of us can explain it. Paul in today's 2nd reading acknowledges that in a Christian community everything is never always going to be perfect. Despite that, the mere effort of trying to work and live together is enormously strengthening. For Paul it is enough that people have faith, it is enough that they believe in Jesus, and the influence for good he can be in our lives.

Today as we pray and Baptize Sean Robert, we pray that faith be a part of his life too.

May God who has given to this family this precious gift allow him to grow in wisdom, love and maturity and may we too remember the part faith plays in our life too.

Amen+