

Live Our Baptism with Faith, The Rev. Rebecca Warlow, Deacon, August 17, 2025

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, amen.

Let me ask you a question. Am I the only one here who has favorite church services? If you have a favorite church service, raise your hand. Maybe a Christmas Eve midnight service or Easter day or perhaps when we use eucharistic prayer C where we talk about the stars and the planets?

I have three favorite services. For obvious reasons, my own ordination as a Deacon is a service I will always cherish. My favorite service of the church year is the Easter vigil on the Saturday evening before Easter.

There's the lighting of a new Pascal candle in fire, candlelight, readings and music, if we're fortunate a baptism to celebrate, and the first Eucharist of the Easter season. If you have never been, I encourage you to go when it comes next year. It's spectacular.

My other favorite service is baptism. Anytime there is a baptism I am always happy and full of joy. For me there is something so awe inspiring each time I see someone make their baptismal vows and become a member of the church.

Baptism is full of meaning. We bless the water in the font and use it to baptize the child in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The sign of the cross is made on the child's forehead with holy oil that has been blessed by the Bishop. And we say you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.

We are sealed and marked as Christ's own forever. Our baptisms are an outward expression of what has been true since we were born. **We are Christ's.**

Being people who belong to Christ calls us to a way of life that can be seen as counter cultural and challenging. Jesus said in our gospel reading that following him is not easy, particularly because the gospel does not always bring peace but fire and division.

This has been true since the very earliest years after the resurrection. As Jewish people turned away from their faith and towards Christianity families were often divided and the leaders persecuted those early Christians.

Even in the early church there were divisions. The primary one was focused on what people had to do in order to join the church and be baptized. The earliest leaders of the church who had grown up following the Jewish faith and then converted to Christianity, felt that non Jewish people should follow all of the Jewish customs such as circumcision and the dietary laws before being baptized as Christians.

Paul however argued that those things were unnecessary to be a Christian. Peter, too, came to believe as Paul did and in chapter 15 of the Book of Acts, he says to the apostles and elders:

“God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts **by faith** he has made no distinction

between them and us. 10Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? 11On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

The first major division in the church was resolved by Peter’s appeal to the council, but divisions within the Church, between the people of the church and world, and simply between people continue.

Last week and this week’s readings from the Letter to the Hebrews are a response to divisions happening among the recipients of the letter. While the exact location of this faith community and the author of this letter are unknown, if you read the entire letter you will see that the community was enduring possible persecution and many members were leaving the faith unable to withstand the pressures they were facing.

The author of the letter encourages the community by reciting the faith of their ancestors. Both those well-known, such as Abraham and Moses and those not well-known. All of whom persevered through their own doubts and fears, through danger, through divisions, and against outside forces seeking to destroy them. The way that they overcame the divisions and the trials they encountered was by faith.

By faith, with faith, through faith these Jewish ancestors persevered in being God’s people and following God’s commandments. And through faith the people to whom this letter was sent also were reminded that they had all they need to follow Jesus and to overcome the things that were dividing them.

It is heartbreaking to me to see that almost 2000 years after our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ was crucified and resurrected for us, that we are still living in the divisive world. In our own country we are divided on many issues such as gun control, immigration, Medicaid, the economy, gender identity, racism, the list could go on and on and on. Heartbreaking.

As Episcopalian Christians, our love for our neighbors divides us from so many in our country. You only need to read the comments under any news article to find people on all sides of an issue spewing hate and insults at each other. We are living in a time of dangerous division. And yet, we come together as people of faith because even in this divided world we are called to love and to walk in faith.

I first walked into this church 21 years ago. I was newly moved to Maryland and it was the only Episcopal Church that I visited. I used to sit right over there about four rows up from the back. I was a bit introverted and it took me a while to get to know people. In one sense I could say I kept myself divided from the rest of the congregation. But then there was Mary Keith that first day and others over the coming weeks who came to greet me and welcome me into this place. Within a year I had joined the Altar Guild, Mary recruited me to help out with baptism preparation, and from there whatever walls I

had put up to divide myself crumbled away because they could not stand against the power of the love of God that lives in this church.

Beloved, I pray that you too feel that love and that you always live out the commandments that we have received from Jesus to love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. That love is greater than anything - anything - that could possibly ever divide you from one another, from your families, from your neighbors, from others who may disagree with you.

I pray that you know you are Christ's own forever, sealed in baptism by the Holy Spirit and marked with holy oil.

I pray that you show the world what it means to live as followers of Jesus Christ by living out our baptismal vows. I pray that you show the world what it means to live by faith by following the apostles' teaching and fellowship, by partaking in communion, and in your prayers. By resisting evil and when you sin, repenting and returning to the Lord. By going out into the world, proclaiming by word and example the Good News of God in Christ; loving your neighbor and seeking Christ in everyone you meet; striving for justice and peace; and respecting the dignity of every human being.

As I leave you today to go serve as a deacon at Sherwood Church, we are not divided from one another. I carry all that you are with me. May God bless this church, Christ Episcopal Church. May God bless each of you. Amen.

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