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Advent 1

On Tuesday of this past week, Catherine and I found ourselves at the O'Connell house talking to six-year-old Emma about baptism. We were invited over for this conversation because Emma had been learning about baptism at St. Michael's where she attends first grade. I brought our baptism box which has all the things you need to learn about baptism and most importantly, to baptize a baby doll. A bowl for the water, oil for anointing, and a candle.

As we talked with Emma about baptism, her mom asked her why she wanted to be baptized. Emma answered without any hesitation... "Because I am a child of God." That seemed like enough of a reason for me.

Emma's mom and I started talking about when we might do the baptism. The baptism of Jesus, which we always celebrate the second Sunday of January, seemed like a good choice. But when Emma realized that we were talking about a date more than a month away, she wasn't too happy with us. She wanted to be baptized tomorrow. She already had her outfit picked out which she brought out of her room for us to see. Why would she wait? Her insistence on immediacy reminded me of the great story in Acts where the Ethiopian who had just learned the good news of Jesus says to Philip, "See, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

That was Emma's attitude. What was to prevent her? So while baptisms during the season of Advent are a little unconventional, Emma O'Connell will be baptized today.

That means I have spent the last few days thinking about how baptism fits into the Advent season. Advent is already a difficult season for us to wrap our heads around. Advent means "coming" and during these four weeks, we tend to think of the coming of the babe in the manger and to prepare for our Christmas celebration of God taking on human form to dwell among us.

But as we clearly hear in the Gospel this morning...the season of Advent is also about that second coming, not the one of the past, but the one we await—the fulfillment of God's promise of a world so unlike the one we live in now. A world where love and justice and compassion reign, and we all live in harmony and peace. We heard in our Gospel that humanity will live through troubling events in this in-between, this "not yet" time. We've been in that in-between time for two thousand years at this point, and there are still troubling events and distress all around us.

Which is why darkness is the theme of this season. It's no coincidence that in the northern hemisphere, Advent comes at the time of the year when the days are becoming shorter and shorter. We lose a little bit of light every day until we get to the winter solstice, just a couple of days before Christmas. It's a dark time of year. It's no wonder we love Christmas lights so much. The twinkling lights illumine the darkness that sets in well before dinner time and give us a feeling of warmth on these cold nights.

We're always looking for ways to counter the darkness. In our collect this morning, we called on God to "give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light." But perhaps we're wrong to think we can or should dispel the darkness so easily. This is how God's creation works and there's beauty to be wrought from the

darkness, too. Like the land that lies fallow this time of year, waiting to be cultivated in the spring, we too, need a season of rest.

So perhaps we shouldn't push away the darkness or fear it. Though we may light a few more candles this time of year. Advent doesn't call us to despair, but to hope and promise. And it invites us into mystery. Because it's more than waiting for the Christ Child or the Kingdom of God. It's a time of recognizing in our daily lives, the moments when God's grace and love break through and we glimpse the fullness of God's dream for us.

So if Advent calls us to hope and promise, then there's no better time to do a baptism. The sacrament of baptism, the physical act of pouring water over the head and calling upon the blessing of God, is just the outward and visible sign of what is already true... that each of us are filled with the grace of God. That is God's gift to give and it is given freely. As Emma rightly said, she is a child of God, as we all are. She's already wrapped in God's love and grace. This public act of baptism simply calls that truth out loud. And it calls all of *us* to respond to that love and grace.

Emma's parents and sponsors will make vows on her behalf, and the faith community gathered will join them in renewing their/our baptismal covenant. When we do that, we tell the story of Jesus as it's told in the Nicene Creed. We commit ourselves anew to this scandalous idea that God became flesh in Jesus, that Jesus then walked among us showing us how to live, that he paid the ultimate sacrifice for proclaiming God's dominion over worldly dominion, and that he then overcame the power of death in the resurrection. And after proclaiming the story of our Christian faith, we'll answer the question, what does that mean for us now? What are we called to do with this life we've been given in Christ?

Baptism is a sign of our Christian hope and our belief in God's promise for the salvation of all humanity. In our baptismal vows, we proclaim that while we may not know when God's kingdom will come...as the Church, as Christ's body here on earth, there are things we can do every day to welcome God's reign of justice and peace. We can reorder our lives in the light of God's love. We can live as people who believe in Jesus as the Savior of all the earth and who expect him to come again to make all things new. We can proclaim as the angels did those many, many years ago that Jesus is to be called Emmanuel—God with us. And we can pray, Come Emmanuel, come dwell with us and give us hope for the world.

Emma's baptism this morning will be a reminder for us that hope and promise abide even in this season of darkness. And while we acknowledge the pain and injustice all around us, we can still find the light and the ways that God breaks through into our lives. If we're paying attention, we'll still find those beautiful moments like when a six-year-old tells you she's a child of God and ready to be baptized—today. May those moments break through for you this Advent season and may you feel the presence of God even in the darkness. Amen.

