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The Fifth Sunday of Pentecost

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St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church



“Hoping against hope” – that’s what St. Paul says Abraham did. He wasn’t just a man of faith; Abraham hoped. Hannah and Abigail, it is wonderful to share this occasion with you, to welcome you into the household of God. This morning I want to think about baptism in light of hope. I want to talk to you, and your siblings in Christ, about this virtue that I feel is very important.

We live in a hope-starved world. When you – Hannah and Abigail – get a little older and start reading the newspaper, you’ll see what I’m talking about. Human beings are made in the image of God, sacred and beautiful. And yet, these humans, it seems, will go to great lengths to self-destruct, and in the process of this self-destruction, try to bring as many others aboard as possible. That might sound like a pessimistic take, but I don’t think it is. Hope never turns away from the facts. The newspaper will tell you of the slow, or not so slow, destruction of our planet at the greedy hands of corporate power and unbridled consumer habits; it will tell you of the racism and xenophobia at work in our neighborhoods and on our borders; it will tell you of the deaths of despair that are happening all throughout this land as our brothers and sisters turn towards chemical relief from the heaviness of their lives. Abraham looked out at the world in his own day, looked down at his old body and his failing powers, and probably knew the same temptations we do – the temptation to cynicism, skepticism, pessimism. And nevertheless, he hoped against hope. I think he invites each one of us to do the same.

I often wonder what it was that made Abraham so commendable to Paul and the earliest Christians, and I think I have a sense: Abraham had a profound conviction that his life was a journey with God. Life was full of new adventures, new tasks, new summons, new discoveries. And the key thing was to embrace the movement and change and seasons of it all. One of the reasons I think our culture has lost a sense of hope is that we’ve lost a sense of life as a journey; we’ve become more about consuming goods, and the governing metaphor of adulthood is settling down. Whereas journey involves risk and change, there is something deep in human nature that desires the comfort of

security and pleasure. To see your life as a journey enables you to be a person of hope because when you hit a rough patch or enter a dark night – you see these places not as inescapable prisons, but more like less-than-ideal hostels along the way.

When we are baptized, God gives us everything we need for life's journey. God gives us the Holy Spirit; God gives us his church, the community of pilgrims on the way; and most tangibly, God gives us three signs, three symbols to accompany us. The three gifts God gives us for this journey of hope are earthy elements, very simple provisions. These provisions are water, oil, and fire.

I want to tell you about the three symbols of baptism.

The first gift for the journey of hope is water. Water symbolizes life and nourishment and hydration and cleansing. In baptism, water symbolizes where we've come from. In just a few moments we'll pour water into the font, and we'll recount the stories of old – how God separated the dry land from the waters in creation; how God, through his servant Moses, led Israel to safety through the waters of the Red Sea; how the Son of God went down into these waters himself. The waters of baptism are ancient waters, and these waters remind you that you are a part of an old, old story. These waters remind you that you are not self-created. They remind you that you didn't bring your own life into existence. They remind you that you don't have to write your own story, your own drama. Your precious life is a part of a larger story. To be a person of hope is to trust that your life is more than an accidental episode in the world's history; I'm afraid a lot of people have bought into this, and this makes hope very difficult to maintain. Never forget that you are continuing the holy family's legacy of healing, and beauty, and salvation. The water reminds you that you are never alone. To be a person of hope is to remember these ancient waters that have carried past generations along, and will carry you, too. Water is the first symbol of baptism.

The second provision, or gift for the journey of hope is holy oil. The oil is a symbol of royalty. If the water tells you where you've come from, the oil tells you who you are - more importantly, whose you are. *You are sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked*

as Christ's own forever. The oil reminds you that you are holy inheritors of a kingdom. You are daughters and sons of a King. You belong to God. So much of your life – so much of our lives – is a search for where we belong. People go to such great lengths to fit in. We posture, and pose, and pretend: dress up, you'll come to discover, isn't just a game children play. The holy oil on your forehead tells you that long before you looked great, long before you made an impression, long before you could achieve anything – you belonged to God. A royal daughter and son of the Most High.

One of the most precious things I get to do is to pray for people at the end of their lives. When I pray with them, I ask them if they'd like to be anointed with oil. The oil we anoint you with in baptism is the same oil with which we anoint you at the end of life's journey. To the old, to the fearful, to the frail, we say, "You are sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever." This gift of this holy oil will carry you through your entire life; it blesses us in our beginnings, and it holds us in our endings. One of the reasons I suspect our world struggles to maintain hope is that we are very much afraid of dying. We go to great lengths to avoid this fact about our existence. We work, and we hustle, and we fret, and we play dress up and pretend we are forever young because we fear death. This oil tells you that you need not fear death. You belong to God.

So far, we've got water and oil. If the water tells you from whence you've come, and the oil who you are, the last gift of the journey is about meaning and purpose. The last gift for the journey of hope might be the most exciting of all. The last symbol is FIRE! We'll light the baptismal candle and say, *Receive the Light of Christ.* I need to tell you a story to illustrate this last gift.

One time when I was in 7th grade, I feared I would be arrested for starting a fire. Me and some friends were in Atlanta for my 12th birthday party, and my dad gave us permission to do a short walk though Centennial Park. Being November and all, we were chilly, and so we decided to gather what sticks and leaves and brush we could. The only problem is that we didn't have a light. A bunch of 7th graders wandering around a park looking for someone with

a light isn't exactly a commendable endeavor, but that was what we were up to. Well, necessity is the mother of adaptive thinking – that's when we asked someone smoking a cigarette if he could help us out. The man in tattered clothes wandered over and lit the fire that provided us about 45 seconds of warmth. Well, this wasn't allowed, and a policeman drew near to tell us as much. It was the most scared I had ever been, being approached by a police officer. When he asked us where our parents were, I told him my dad was just a block away. When he asked if we knew that it was illegal to start a fire in a city park, I said, "Yes, but it's getting dark, and we were cold." The man in tattered clothes said, "Officer, I started it for them." The policeman gave us a talking to and left us alone. We thanked our new friend profusely.

I thought of that memory as I thought about the light of Christ. Now there is very little from this story for you to emulate. But I do hope you, and all of us, look for the light in the least of these; I hope *we receive the light of Christ* from them. I hope you remember that your journey will be all the richer, your hope all the fuller, by the different sorts of people – all colors, all sexual orientations, all economic statuses – you allow to bless you, and for you to bless, on the journey. They'll carry this sacred flame for you, and you for them.

It's here, finally, I need to make an important distinction. Hope often gets confused with optimism. Often times, we think of hopeful people as people who see the glass half full. Hope, I'm here to tell you, has very little to do with optimism. My dad used a funny expression recently that feels like a good definition for optimism: it's like throwing lipstick on a pig. Optimism surveys the landscape of the world with a bias towards seeing the light. That sounds like a good thing, but optimism is a noun. Hope is a verb. So eager to affirm the light, sometimes it seems like optimists can be afraid to look into the dark; not so of those with hope: that's precisely where they look to carry the light. I've learned in ministry that sometimes life calls you not to try and fix things or people, so much as just be present, simply there – and trust that your presence is the flame of Christ's light. You will be that sacred flame for so many people.

Water, oil, and fire – these elements, these mysteries are all of ours, and they are here to inspire, encourage, and enable our hope along the way. Don't simply look for hope in the world; be the hope of the world. No, that's not quite right: Jesus is the hope of the world, the companion who never leaves us or forsakes us. And baptism is to be enlisted into a wonderful, and sacred, and holy calling to make his hope more real, more tangible, more elemental – like water, like oil, like fire. Like flesh.

