

Today [at 10:30] we are baptizing Ali Rose and Theo.

Baptism is full initiation into Christ's body, the Church.

Not into Holy Trinity or the Episcopal Church

or the Anglican Communion, but the whole church.

Across all the world. Across all time and space.

I wonder what kind of church these two precious children are entering  
in THIS time and THIS space?

What kind of church are they entering right now?

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Last week Berkeley sent me the results of a survey called  
the American Beliefs Study<sup>1</sup>,

which asked 15,000 Americans what religion,  
if any, they claim for themselves.

The good news is that 64% of the people in this country -  
213 million people - self-identify as Christians, as followers of Jesus.

The bad news is that over the last ten years  
that number has dropped by 15 million.

15 million less people call themselves Christians in this country now  
than did 10 years ago.

This is not surprising news to many of us.

My computer is full of reports on the decline of The Episcopal Church,  
and of Christianity as a whole in the West,

and the pandemic has only accelerated a trend

that this survey tells us was already happening.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.acstechnologies.com/american-beliefs-study/>

For a few years we in the Episcopal Church told ourselves  
it wasn't like that in the OTHER churches,  
that the mega-churches and non-denominational churches  
were thriving because they were more appealing than us.

But that self-defeatist perspective hasn't really proven to be true.  
Decline in church participation is happening in all expressions  
of Christianity in our country,  
not just in what we used to call the mainstream denominations.

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We don't have good data yet on COVID-Church,  
but the emerging consensus seems to be that since it began,  
in-person attendance has fallen to about 2/3 of what it was in 2019  
across the whole church in America,  
though curiously that two-thirds is often made up of about  
50% previous attenders and 16% new people.<sup>2</sup>

That tracks with what we're seeing at Holy Trinity.  
Lots of new faces but it adds up to only about two-thirds  
of the in-person attendance we had in 2019.

A silver lining is the surprising number of people worshipping with us  
via our live-stream.

I heard from another family on Friday who said  
they're watching every Sunday and I had no idea. [Hi there!]

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<sup>2</sup> <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-carey-nieuwhof-leadership-podcast/id912753163?i=1000574720411>

In other parts of the world, Christianity is growing rapidly.

In the Southern hemisphere, Christianity has the energy  
and the gravitational pull that comes with growth,  
and leadership is starting to move in that direction.

It can feel a little threatening,  
this feeling that the center of influence is moving away from us  
and towards another part of the globe,  
but this is where we put to the test our claims  
that in Christ there is no East or West.

It's easy to say when you're on top, but does it ring true when you're not?

Bishops from across the Anglican communion,  
representing 85 million Anglicans worldwide,  
are wrapping up their every-ten years trip to Lambeth Conference,  
and it's fascinating to read their accounts of what  
communion looks like when the center of influence is moving.

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So where does all this leave us as a parish?

Where do all these global and national trends leave Ali Rose and Theo,  
who are about to become the newest members of Christ's body?

When their parents and godparents promise that they will be responsible  
for seeing that they are brought up in the Christian faith and life,  
what challenges and opportunities will they face in living that out?

I can't imagine what the Church in America will look like,  
but here are some thoughts on what life at Holy Trinity could look like  
over the next 10 or 20 years.

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I think the biggest challenges we'll face most are the same ones  
we face now, just accelerated.

A loss of social expectation that we set aside time in our lives for worship.  
Even a lessening INTERNAL expectation for one another  
that coming together week after week is a priority.

And we'll continue to deal with our society's lost sense of sabbath,  
which is a loss we haven't really admitted to ourselves.

We're going to see more and more that for rich and poor alike  
there is no day when we're free from work,  
no day when rest is defended for its own sake.

And that loss of sabbath is going to continue to be expressed  
in the perverse expectation of children to "get ahead in life"  
by being involved in every possible activity they can,  
which will only increase the stress put on families.

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On the other hand,

Holy Trinity has some real strengths & opportunities that will help us.  
We have a long history of strong, steady leadership,  
and that tradition will continue and help us  
weather whatever comes.

We'll also probably continue to benefit from this being a good area  
to live and work in,  
and the Episcopal Church is well-suited for Decatur  
because we are comfortable with the natural world,  
with intellectual questions, and with social trends.

And now we have this wonderful bequest to increase our presence  
in the community, to reach out into the community and world  
with love and with the gospel message.

Surely the faithful use of this gift will protect us from insularity and fear.

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Whatever the future looks like for Ali Rose and Theo, for all of us,  
we know there will be challenges because there are always challenges.  
We know it'll be hard because it's always been hard.

Plagues, depression, wars, segregation - it's always been hard to follow God.  
It goes all the way to the beginning.

“The word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision,  
“Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield.”

Do not be afraid, the Lord said?

Abram was a seventy-five year old man with a seventy-five year old wife  
and they had no children.

Abram knew what the rest of his life was going to look like

& while it wasn't everything he had dreamed of, it wasn't all that bad.

But the Lord said to Abram, “Leave the place where you have lived  
your whole life. Leave your neighbors and your friends  
and your family's home and go to a land that I will show you.”

Abram asked where this land was and when they would get there,  
but the Lord was a little fuzzy on the details.

In fact, over and over the finish line seemed to jump around on him,  
but each time Abram believed in the Lord and it was reckoned to him  
as righteousness.

And finally one day, the Lord made good on his promises  
and he and Sarah settled in the land God promised  
and had children of their own long after that was supposed  
to be possible. It was hard, but God kept his promise.

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By the waters of baptism,  
by dying WITH Christ and being reborn IN Christ,  
Ali Rose and Theo are being grafted into the same promise  
that God made to Abram all those centuries ago:  
“Come with me. Trust me in good days and bad  
and I will bless you so that you will be a blessing to others.”

We don't know the hardships our parish will face, or the American Church,  
or the Church Catholic.

We don't know what these two precious children will face.  
But we will not face it alone.

All we have to decide is if the good news that God loves us enough  
to SUFFER death and then CONQUER death is good enough  
and trustworthy enough to believe in.

If it is, God will be with us in good times and bad,  
and no matter what challenges we face, we know how the story ends.

Decide again today if you are ready to trust God with your whole heart,  
and if you are, get ready for a great adventure.

Amen.