

I was doing a little reading on baptism this week,
getting ready for today's feast day - the Baptism of Our Lord -
and for the baptisms of little Oliver and James
in just a few minutes.
I came across a beautiful passage from the 1928
Book of Common Prayer.

And by the way, I didn't find it in just any old '28 prayer book,
I found it in the prayer book that blessed Pearline Gilpin
gave me before she died.

Here's the passage:

Dearly beloved, forasmuch as our Saviour Christ saith, 'None can enter
into the Kingdom of God, except he be regenerate and born anew of
Water and of the Holy Ghost'; I beseech you to call upon God the
Father, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that of his bounteous mercy he
will grant to this Child that which by nature he cannot have;

That last phrase is what got me: that God "...will grant to these children
that which by nature they cannot have."

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What is God is giving Oliver and James in baptism,
that the world cannot give, that we here at Holy Trinity cannot give,
that they cannot, by nature, acquire for themselves?

Two things, I think.

First, God is giving them grace and forgiveness for this world.

We live in a world of cause and effect.

We live in a world of consequences.

When we fail ourselves, hurt ourselves,
and just as importantly, when we fail and hurt others,
there are consequences. Internal and external consequences.

Punishment. Rejection. Condemnation.
Wounds that never heal, scars that stay with us,
that haunt us, and shape who we are.
It is the natural way of things.

But God has promised us that those who give their heart to him
are not trapped by the failings of their past.

God is promising Oliver and James that when they repent,
when they turn away from the darkness, that they will be forgiven,
that they will be reborn, that they will be free of guilt,
free of shame, that they will be free to start again.

The world may still have its consequences,
but like a prisoner in Kairos, like a drunk in recovery,
like a prodigal son coming home,
in the eyes of God they will be made new.

In 1968, Johnny Cash sang to a group of inmates at Folsom,
“Inside the walls of prison my body may be,
but the Lord has set my soul free.”
God can give us what the world cannot.

Oliver and James will probably never end up in jail,
but we know they will both experience at some point
what all of us have - those seasons of life where
we feel trapped by our failings,
where we think that our worth as a person
has been permanently diminished.

God is promising Oliver and James what God has already promised us:
that the Lord's mercies are new every morning
and that none of us - NONE OF US -
is defined by our worst moments.

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The second thing God gives them...is life eternal.

The world cannot give them that. We cannot give them that.

They cannot earn that for themselves.

We simply do not live in a universe designed for eternal life.

Everything dies. That's a fact.

Flowers, animals, people. Ideas, planets, galaxies - death awaits everything.

It is the very essence of nature.

But God has promised Oliver and James that something outside of nature
is awaiting them at the end of their natural life - a MIRACLE!

God has promised that because Jesus took on human flesh,
because Jesus announced of the Kingdom of God come near,
because Jesus died on the cross,
the Lamb of God who was indeed God,
because Jesus rose on Easter morning
and because ascended to God's right hand,
for these and no other reasons the MIRACLE of life eternal
is now offered to any who give their heart to God.

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In a minute the parents and godparents - and big sisters -
will stand and promise to raise Oliver and James
in the knowledge and love of all that God has done for them.

Then we'll all stand and renew our own baptismal vows,
we'll proclaim once again our commitment to life in Christ.

But before we all talk about what great things WE will do,
sit quietly for a moment and focus on what really matters:
what God is doing - for Oliver, for James, and for you.

Amen