

The Epiphany, Year B
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
January 7, 2018
Baptism of Maggie Marshall Frizzell

Episcopalians enjoy a bit of theater with our worship. It's all stylized and symbolic, and there are many, many costume changes. We carefully tend to the set pieces, and our pit orchestra is second to none. For those of you who come just on Sundays, you might miss the hustle and bustle of life backstage. Before we gather for any kind of worship—eucharist, baptism, wedding, funeral—there are countless people running around and tending to all the moving pieces that make up our liturgy. It can be a reverent and solemn task to prepare God's house. And it can also be hilarious.

One such backstage comedy happens at just about every wedding I officiate. There's a tense moment at the back of the church where all the bridesmaids and groomsmen are lined up—scrubbed within an inch of their lives and concentrating dutifully on getting down the aisle in one piece. I'm typically standing back there directing traffic and generally being friendly to people who haven't darkened a church doorstep for years. Invariably, one of the groomsmen will ask me, "how should we hold our hands as we walk down the aisle." "Should they be at our sides or in front of us." I try to say as kindly as possible that no one has come to see their hands; they're all here for the bride. Just do what feels natural.

Then the big event happens. No one notices anyone's hands. The happy couple is married or the baby is baptized or the eucharist is celebrated. And the priest and all the church elves close down the theatre, the organ is dampened, and we cut the lights and turn off the heat. End scene.

We're entering a time in the church year that begs the question "now what?" It's the same question that married couples ask after they're returned from their honeymoon and the grind of work and life and family begin. It's the same question that parents ask after the magic of baptism fades and the reality of diapers and daycare rears its head. It's the same question we're asking this morning after the angels have winged back to heaven, the shepherds have gone back to their flocks, and the wise men have discharged their duties and returned to their homes lighter some gold, frankincense and myrrh. Transformed by this experience of the incarnate God, now what do we do?

In his collection, *The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations*, Baptist pastor, theologian and poet Howard Thurman asks and answers this question better than I can,

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,*

*To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.*

For all the care and effort we put into our beautiful worship, it really is just prelude for living our lives outside of these doors. What does it mean to follow Christ, to be a Christian? It can't end with the pageantry in this room. This all must mean something, must drive us somewhere. Liturgy and life must meet, or we're just putting on the best puppet show in Christendom. When we promise in our baptism vows to "strive for justice and peace among all peoples, and respect the dignity of every human being," that promise has teeth. The person that society tries to throw away is the exact same person that we have promised to love. The kid without food is our kid. The mother being crippled by medical bills is our mother. The guy with no hope or future is our friend, and any institution who dares to ignore the needs of the lost, broken, hungry, or prisoner is our enemy.

That's quite a lot to put on a little baby, isn't it? We welcome you, little Maggie, into the family of Christ. Now leave these doors and go change the world. What a frightening and enormous task we are giving this tiny child.

Never fear, you wonderful little baby. You are not alone. Everyone in this room has spoken these vows or had them spoken on their behalf when they too were babies. Each person in this room is a member of your family, a friend in troubled times, a co-conspirator in the life-long project of living as a Christian. Welcome to your tribe, Maggie.

Remember your promises, people of God. Remember that you are not just to enjoy our happy theater for an hour a week. When the last song fades, the deacon sends you into this hurting world to share the good news of Christ: light in the darkness, hope in the midst of despair, life instead of death. The baptized people of God, working together in love and prayer, can accomplish anything. And soon, we will make public what God has already known since the moment she drew breath—little Maggie has joined our family and our struggle.

We followed the star to this manger. We've been to the big event. Now it's time to rely on our baptisms to guide us out these doors and into the world with peace and power. Amen.