

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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I come from generations of Baptists, and they don't baptize babies as we do. Maybe this is why my siblings and I were baptized when we were a little older. So, unlike most Episcopalians, I remember my Baptism. I was nine years old, and two things stand out: 1. It was so, so strange to have the pastor come over to my house and talk about baptism in his street clothes, and 2. My outfit.

It was baptized around Christmas time, and I had gotten a new sweater that I absolutely loved. It was green, purple, and white and had a big Lacoste alligator on the front. I don't remember anything about the promises I made, and I don't remember anything that the pastor said to prepare me for Baptism. But I remember that sweater. I'll remember it on my death bed.

Christians have a long history of dressing the infant candidates for baptism in a particular way — often in a white dress or special outfit. The festive occasion invites us to think about special clothes that we wouldn't normally wear in our regular life. As I told the family of Max Jr. yesterday, Baptism is a rite that comes with layers and layers of meaning. The first and most obvious is that it's an initiation rite into the Christian faith and a welcome to the world. That is the sweet and lovely reading of the ritual, and it's one that makes a lot of sense when you look into the eyes of a sleeping baby.

But for adults, Baptism is more than the sweet clothes and the silver rattles. For adults, Baptism can look more like what Jesus talked about in the Gospel this morning. Jesus talks about war and strife and families being torn apart. I don't think I have to tell you that these things are real and exist in our world.

One of the promises we make, or our parents make on our behalf, at Baptism is to respect the dignity of every human being. You'll note that a person's nationality, socio-economic pedigree, and tribe of origin aren't mentioned. You are to respect every person. Or, put another way, we recognize that every person that we meet is, in fact, a little slice of God. Every person we encounter is a member of the body of Christ, and that fact brings with it certain responsibilities. We are never allowed to treat people as if they are objects or, worse, commodities.

So imagine this: You are heartbroken by the crisis on the border. You see pictures of crying mothers and frightened children. You think to yourself: these poor and suffering people are my brothers and sisters in Christ. They are little slices of God, and I don't believe it is right to cage God. You fly to the border of Mexico, and you walk into a detention center. You say to the warden there that the children who are separated from their families — Children no older than Max Jr. — are not being treated with the dignity that you think God requires, and so you're just going to walk in and let them go free. You begin to walk up to the guards with the intention of walking past them and into the center. What do you imagine happens next in the scenario? Do

they, understanding that you are acting out of the covenant you made at your baptism, step aside and let you into the center? Or will you be treated with violence?

This is what I think Jesus is talking about when he says that I came to bring fire to the earth: when you try to live out the call of Jesus to the poor and the marginalized, there will often be a big reaction to your action. When we take our Christian responsibility to the vulnerable seriously, the powers and principalities of the world do not like it.

And so Jesus teaches that to follow him is to find strife with the ways of the world. I hope it is many, many years before this is a lesson that Max Jr. needs to learn. But someday, he will be called on — as we are all eventually called on — to choose between the well being of vulnerable persons and the good opinion of the powerful. And, with the support of his parents, godparents, and this community of faith, we hope he will be strong enough to choose the path that Jesus lays out for us — even when it is difficult.

So, today is a party. A welcome to the world, and a welcome to the family. It is also a day that Max's parents and godparents say out loud promises about the kind of life they intend for Max to have — one that follows the path of Jesus even when it is difficult.

And, of course, every time we participate in a baptism, we are reminded that we've made these promises as well. We promise God that we'll do our part to live as if the kingdom of God is already present. We promise to see Christ in the other even when it is strange or difficult. And if we can remind ourselves of that as well as teach it to Max as he grows into the full stature of his Christian faith, then what we do here this morning will change the world. Amen.