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St. John's Episcopal, Olney MD

Good morning. My name is Janice Hicks and I'm very happy to say that I am the new deacon here at St. John's. I started in mid-November and I will be coming approximately half the Sundays to serve with Fr. Henry and Mo. Shivaun. Later in this sermon I'll say more about what a deacon is and how I envision serving here. I look forward to getting to know each of you!

For just over a year, I've been a full-time chaplain at Asbury Methodist Village, a retirement community in Gaithersburg. There is much to learn from the elders. On one of my first days there, when a senior asked me, how is it going? I said, "I'm busy learning everyone's names." She said, "You will learn them, There's no rush!" I realized she was right, and it felt good not to have the pressure of rushing. We live with so much rushing in our world and we miss so much.

So I hope you will join me in *not rushing* as we get to know each other!

Last week I visited the National Geographic Museum – the exhibit called "Becoming Jane" about Jane Goodall. Jane spent her life studying the behavior of chimpanzees in Gombe Stream National Park in western Tanzania. I was struck by her life and how at a very young age she used to observe animals. At 5 years old, she disappeared for several long hours while her family frantically searched for her – she was sitting in the henhouse watching a chicken lay an egg. Fortunately for us, her mother encouraged her love of animals and her careful observations. It was highly unusual for a woman at that time to do scientific field work. Jane's work on chimpanzees revolutionized many theories about what distinguishes humans from animals and, it can be said, changed our relationship with animals. At 85, she still travels extensively to fight for conservation of habitat for wildlife.

What does this story have to do with our lessons today on the second Sunday after Epiphany? Our gospel from John has two parts, really. The first part tells of Christ's baptism (we heard Matthew's version last week.) And the second part tells of the calling of two apostles Andrew and Peter.

Jesus's cousin John had been baptizing people in the Jordan River for some time. I don't know about you but I wasn't sure where the ritual of baptism came from. When did it start? The word suddenly appears in our scripture with no real explanation. Today we hear John the Baptist speak of "the one who *sent* me to baptize with water." This may mean that the Baptist had a vision from God instructing him to do it. John was *sent*. John was *called* to be a baptizer.

The word baptism comes from the Greek "bapto" (βαπτω), which means "to dip, to immerse." The word clearly refers to immersing the whole body in water, and not the sprinkling of water that is common in many of our churches. Water- water is very important in the desert! From Psalm 29 "the voice of God is over the waters!"

John may have adapted an older Jewish tradition of cleansing and purification, where people immersed *themselves* in water. One can see in ancient Jewish excavations many structures for ritual baths, with steps leading into a pool of water.

But in Luke we learn that *John's baptism by water* was for *repentance*, a turning away from sin, and for *forgiveness*.¹ This was a new aspect.

The Greek word βαπτω also means to dye, as in dyeing cloth to change its color. Originally the cloth was *dipped* in the dye.² This gives us one metaphor for baptism. Baptism changes one's *hue*. That is, the ritual is transformational. We enter the water as one thing and emerge completely different. One writer puts it, "Entering the divine life is always the experience of something that is beyond ourselves, an experience that overwhelms, and opens a new heaven and a new earth."³

But later the nature of baptism changes again. God says to John, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain (that is, Jesus) is the one who baptizes *with the Holy Spirit*." And John testifies that this Jesus is indeed the Son of God. In this season of Epiphany, the Church celebrates the fact that *God is manifest in the human being named Jesus of Nazareth*.

After Jesus's resurrection, the disciples obeyed Jesus's commandment – "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, *baptizing them...*"

They continued baptism in *his* name, and this superseded the baptism of John.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, we are dyed into Christians. We come out with a new color. We become part of the whole-cloth of Christ.

After being baptized, *the next day* Jesus started his ministry, calling two of the apostles, Andrew and Simon. He gave Simon a new name -- Peter. Getting a new name, a new identity, is like the transformation we are talking about, entering the divine life – a new heaven and a new earth.

Just as Jesus received baptism at the beginning of his ministry, what did your baptism prepare you for?

In the Luke version describing baptism, John the Baptist says, the more Powerful One "will baptize you in a holy spirit and fire."

Fire can be thought of as both heat and light; as both destroying and building up. Fire consumes and chemically transforms. A third meaning of the Greek word βαπτω is "to temper" as in tempering a metal.⁴ To temper a piece of metal, such as steel, means to heat it up to a very high temperature, and then to cool it, making it harder and tougher.

Here's another metaphor for baptism— perhaps we think of our challenging times as tempering us and making us stronger. Gregory of Nyssa, one of the early Church fathers, wrote of his beloved sister St. Macrina:

"Testing of gold takes place in several furnaces so that if any impurity escapes the first furnace, it may be separated in the second and again in the last one all admixture of dross may be purged away...in this way *the metal of her soul became undefiled*."⁵

We might begin to think of our "baptism" as the challenges that come during our lives.

The expansive times, the shrinking times.

The hot times, the chilled times.

¹ Luke 3:3

² Ferguson p. 43.

³ Timothy Sedgwick, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol 1.

⁴ Ferguson, p. 42.

⁵ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of St. Macrina*

The times we are on the hot seat, the times we take a back seat.
The tempering makes us more resilient and alloys us to God, that is, metaphorically mixes our very particles with God.
Do we ever think of these times as “*entering the divine life?*”

Was there a challenge in your life, or is there a challenge now in your life, where you feel it is like being baptized by fire? Maybe there is an illness – a chronic one that is testing your spirit. Or unrequited love. Maybe a difficult loss of a loved one.
Maybe there is someone in your life whose unpredictable behavior troubles or hurts you. We're forever changed by our baptisms by fire, often for the better, but it's hard to trust in that eventual positive outcome or hard-won blessing as we're going through them.

Through these painful moments, we cannot forget that God was with us and is with us now, *God loves us*. In Isaiah, God says, “When you walk through fire you will not be burned, and *the flame shall not consume you.*”⁶

We are changed forever by baptism -- by water, by spirit or by fire –
and we believe we are sent from it to serve. In the baptismal vows from the book of Common Prayer:

Celebrant Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving
your neighbor as yourself?

People I will, with God's help.

It is our own season of Epiphany when we realize we are called to serve and when we say yes to our call. I imagine Jane Goodall had some terrifying moments as she moved from comfortable, safe England to the wilderness of Tanzania in 1960. She may not speak of it in religious terms, but we can see that her call was that strong. It took a lot of courage to “Become Jane.” Each of us faces that challenge – how to become fully ourselves, how to achieve our purpose.

This quest does not end, no matter what one’s age. One author writes, “Each stage and phase of life is ordained by God and therefore has a purpose. We grow in never-ending spirals of change... with the Spirit nudging and guiding us always. There is no one phase of life that is more important than another; each has its place; each is equally essential.”⁷ God never ceases calling. We humans are destined for greater things, ultimately, to *eternal life* through our Lord Jesus Christ.

“Becoming Jane.” “Becoming ____” (fill in your name!) What is that story?

Let me end with a few words about the role of deacon. The Rector and Associate Rector are shepherds of the parish – primarily taking care of the spiritual, the pastoral, education, worship, music, and all good things within the Church. The deacon has one foot in the parish and one foot in the community, serving as a kind of bridge. The deacon’s foot in the community may have a short reach – to the neighborhood, to Olney, or may have a longer reach – to the county, the state, the country, the world. And the deacon does nothing alone, but rather – I will bring parishioners with me! Together we assess the needs of our community and work to address them.

⁶ Is 43:2

⁷ Richard Johnson, Lifelong Faith, Spring 2007.

Any church is its people, not its building. One question we learned in our training to ask is – if St. John’s were to close its doors tomorrow, that is, if the parish were to go away, who in the surrounding community would be impacted?

I am learning already of many exciting outreach projects here, some that you heard about this morning during the announcements. I see many hardworking and faithful followers serving Christ in the ways they can at the various stages of their lives. And you have welcomed me, thank you. I look forward to working with you on present and future projects. I hope my chaplain background will help, because chaplains are trained to listen carefully and name what we see. I look forward to discerning with you God’s voice in the story of St. John’s. Just as Andrew and Peter had no idea where God was leading them, so it is with us.

I have some homework for you. I have a new email address deacon@stjec.org. Please write to me with answers to these two questions -
If St Johns were to close its doors tomorrow, what difference would it make to those outside the parish?
And secondly--
What are your ideas and dreams about what we might do? What are the skills in the parish? What are the needs of the community?

As Aristotle said, “Where your talents and the world's needs cross, there lies your vocation.”

“Come and see,” says Jesus. We are called to be a Holy people.

As we celebrate tomorrow the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, let us remember words from his last sermon:

“Yes, Jesus, I want to be on your right or your left side, not for any selfish reason. I want to be on your right or your left side, not in terms of some political kingdom or ambition. But I just want to be there in love and in justice and in truth and in commitment to others, so that we can make of this old world a new world.”⁸

AMEN.

⁸ <https://gratefulness.org/resource/dr-martin-luther-king-jr-to-serve/>