Easter IVB: Baptism of Hazel Mae Lopez

April 22, 2018

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All Saints’, Wolcott

*“Little children, let us love not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”*

Happy 22nd Day of Easter! Today is the Fourth Sunday of Easter – not quite half way through this glorious but wintry season of Resurrection, on our way to Pentecost, that great feast of the Holy Spirit. This Fourth Sunday of Easter is always referred to as “Good Shepherd Sunday,” because the appointed passage from the Gospel of John is always about Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Much of the 10th Chapter of John’s Gospel is about Jesus and his sheep (that would be us). In each year of the three-year lectionary cycle, we are given one of the images of the work of Jesus as shepherd.

Did you know that the earliest image of the risen Jesus in the visual arts is not of the cross or the empty tomb, but of Jesus as Good Shepherd? An ancient image of him has been found painted on the wall of one of the very earliest house-churches uncovered by archaeologists. Usually Jesus is shown carrying a lamb around his shoulders and a shepherd’s crook in his hand. When I was a student at the General Theological Seminary in New York City, I worshiped three times a day with my classmates in the Chapel of the Good Shepherd, which sits in the very center of the Close (campus). A life-sized marble statue of the Good Shepherd stands behind the altar. In the first congregation which I served as a priest, on the rear wall of the Baptistry hung a painting of the Good Shepherd. The cadillac Christian Formation program for children is a Montessori-based curriculum titled “The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.” I have a number of crosses which I wear from time to time; my favorite is one which bears on it the image of the Good Shepherd. I think you get the idea: it’s a favorite image in the history of Christianity, and even from *before* the birth of Jesus: one of the best-loved psalms from the Jewish Scriptures is the one we recited this morning – the 23rd Psalm - which begins “The Lord is my shepherd…” on which is based the entrance hymn we sang (and others we will sing yet today). The psalm (written several hundred years before the birth of Jesus) reminds us Christians that wherever we go, even to death and beyond, Jesus has been there before us and prepared a safe pathway for us to travel.

“I am the good shepherd,” says Jesus in the Gospel of John. “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” No better statement could be made of the death and resurrection of our Savior Jesus Christ. Years later, the author of the First Letter of John expands on that statement with a theological explanation: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us.” And then John calls us to action - we who bear the name “Christian;” we who are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and “marked as Christ’s own forever” – John calls us to “lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone,” John asks, “who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” This is the mission on which the Holy Spirit of God sends us (as the Spirit sent Jesus at the time of his own Baptism) – to flood the world around us with the healing love of God which has been given to us in Jesus. For each and every Christian, this mission - this “sending” - derives its power from the Easter moment of Baptism, which is *always* an Easter moment, no matter what time of the year it occurs, because Baptism is about dying and rising in and with Christ – dying to sin and rising to new and eternal life.

The action to which John calls us is no less than the actions we have seen in the life of Jesus our Savior. As we read the scriptures, we learn of a life devoted to prayer, to healing, to the importance of community; to hospitality and welcome to all (and especially to standing with and supporting the outcast, the friendless, and the most vulnerable, even when that may not be the most popular thing to do); to a life of humility and generosity of spirit; to forgiveness of those who hurt us; and to respect and honor for all Creation. To the extent to which we act in these ways, the love of God in Christ will be known to this world in which we live. It isn’t easy. Sometimes it may be dangerous. But it is the right thing to do. And it can bring new life to the people to whom we extend it, and healing and new life to the natural world for which God calls us to care – something of which we are particularly reminded on this Earth Day.

It is into this awesome and awe-filled life of Christ that we welcome today Hazel Mae Lopez. Hazel Mae, you may not now be aware of it, but you are about to be born again for the second time in just five short months. The family which knows and loves you is about to expand exponentially; to spread around this whole world. Hazel Mae, your parents, Godparents, and all of us who are here today will promise, on behalf of that global Christian community, to help you grow in the knowledge and love of God and in the faith of the Church. We promise to show you, by our words and actions, what it means to “walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us.” Come regularly to the Table of the Lord and feast on heavenly food, that in it, Jesus may revive your soul and strengthen you for your mission of love. Resist the temptations which would draw you from the love of God and let the spirit of Jesus fill you with his own love, to serve all those for whom he died (that’s *everyone*, Hazel Mae). In today’s Gospel passage, we hear Jesus say “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice, so there will be one flock, one shepherd.” So when those around you tempt you to reject certain persons because they are different from you in race, religion, financial means, age, gender, ability or disability, challenge your tempters to join you, instead, on the path of love. In a world which is desperately divided in so many ways, show what it means to forgive and to seek unity and reconciliation, for Christ’s sake. Practice not the love of power, but practice, instead, the power of love, because that is the work of the Good Shepherd, and the message of Easter.

Alleluia!