



## CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Lord, you now have set your servant free. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Today we are baptizing a child named Gracelyn and that made me think about my own baptism. I was baptized 33 years ago, last September, on the Feast of the Holy Cross. I had grown up in a nominally Christian family. My parents were both from Kansas and had grown up in various churches, not the Episcopal Church, but by the time my sister and I came along, we were living in Southern California. And there was no expectation that we would be in a church on Sunday morning, and so we weren't.

The only exception came when I was just five years old. My best friend and his little sister died in a terrible fire. My mother started taking us to a Presbyterian church where she had been invited by a friend. And it didn't last long. It only lasted a year or so. We stopped going. I don't know why.

I don't remember much about that little church, but I remember feeling safe and welcomed and loved there. I remember my Sunday school teacher, Mrs. Dryden, she's the one who taught me to sing, "Yes, Jesus Loves Me." I remember singing in a children's choir like our little ones did this morning. I had all those vestments. There are pictures of my sister and me on the front lawn of my parents' home dressed like that, singing for all of you. What a beautiful thing.

And I remember a children's sermon down on the steps with the pastor. It was all about Noah's Ark and all those smelly animals. The pastor told us about the rainbow sign and about how God always keeps God's promises. No matter what, he said, God would remain faithful to us. God is the one friend who never lets us down. And I am here today because of the loving witness of those people. I am here today to tell you about the same Jesus they shared with me.

By the time I got to college at Harvard, I was having adult problems. I was looking for something. Not sure I know what it was, but I was definitely looking for something. With my Methodist roommate, I started attending Sunday Services at the university's Memorial Church. I also started going to morning prayer every day based on the Book of Common Prayer. I began to read the Bible and take classes at the Divinity School, and I started to notice the growing number of unhoused

people living on the streets of Cambridge. Their presence among us made the God of Jesus and the prophets come alive.

One day at a local laundromat, I saw a man strip down to his underwear to wash the only clothes he had. His desperate circumstances and quiet dignity spoke straight to my heart. I became convinced that he was exactly the kind of person with whom Jesus spent most of His time. As we learn in the scriptures, Jesus loves the least of these who are "members of my family." Mother Teresa called it the gospel on five fingers. You did it unto me.

One dark night during my junior year, I saw a crucifix on the outside wall of a local Roman Catholic church. I found myself kneeling in the snow in front of an image of Jesus crucified, and I offered to live the rest of my life for Him. In that moment, I found an incredible sense of peace and joy. I had been found by the living God, and God changed my life forever.

Not long after that, back home in San Diego, I was baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus. I was 22 years old. It happened at All Souls Episcopal Church, the parish nearest my parents' home. Later, Tracy and I were married there, and I will never forget the words the priest said right afterwards. As he anointed me on my forehead with the sign of the Cross, Bill, he said, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever. Now, some of you have heard these words spoken to yourselves or maybe your children. Today, we will say them to Gracelyn. They are powerful words. They speak to us about God's amazing gift that nothing and no one can ever take away from her.

Gracelyn, I love that name, such a beautiful name. I love any name that contains the word grace. In the Bible, Grace is another name for the Holy Spirit. Grace is God's own love and favor poured into our hearts. Grace gives us the power to follow Jesus and to love other people just like He does. Grace is God's own gift, unearned and undeserved. Like the wind, she goes wherever she wants to. She's wild and uncontrollable. She is utterly, totally free.

As we learn on the day of Pentecost, God pours out God's spirit on all flesh. All flesh. Not some flesh. Not the flesh of a chosen few, but all flesh. When it comes to gift giving, God is prodigal and indiscriminate. God shows no partiality. God knows no strangers. God has no enemies, only children. God refuses to let our weakness and poor choices define us. In God's eyes, we are always beloved children. As often as we fall away, God gives us a fresh start and a new life. God gives us the power to love. Even when we think we have forgotten how, God gives us the power to love.

Baptism is an awesome experience of claiming God's love in our lives, but it isn't the first time we experienced that love. Rather, baptism is one powerful way that

we receive the love that God is always pouring out on us. The Holy Spirit is always already at work in our lives. She leads us back to God and back to each other. She leads us deeper and deeper into Jesus until He becomes this living center of our lives. Sometimes human witnesses show us God's love, like that little Presbyterian church did for me, or like Christ Church Cranbrook has done for so many of you. But God's own spirit works directly in our hearts. Because the word became flesh, God's spirit is poured out on all flesh. She is the living spirit of Jesus and His love.

From the beginning of Luke's Gospel, the Holy Spirit is a major character. As many of you may know, Luke is the first part of a two-part work, which includes the acts of the apostles. In Luke chapter four, preaching to His hometown synagogue, Jesus applies the words of the prophet Isaiah to Himself in a kind of inaugural address for God's kingdom. “The Spirit of the Lord,” He says, “is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” Among the four evangelists, Luke is the one who tells us about the day of Pentecost when God's Spirit sets our hearts on fire. The Spirit of the living God invites us to go out and bear witness, to share the good news with every living creature. She is the giver of life, the one who spoke by the prophets.

In today's gospel, the Holy Family has come to do their duty according to the Torah. They're going to make a sacrifice because Jesus is their firstborn son. They offer two turtle doves, which is the sacrifice of the poor, and they are greeted by two prophets, Simeon and Anna. Each prophesize about the meaning of this child, though Anna's words sadly are not written down. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon greets our Savior. In so doing, he proclaims good news for us all. Look, he says, look, here is the one we are waiting for. Anna, likewise exalts in the Holy Spirit as she sings the praises of God.

These two poor devout Jews have been waiting for a long, long time. They have known the famine of the Word of God. They have experienced helplessness, maybe even despair, but they have kept on praying and waiting for God's promise of salvation. They have prayed in the temple day and night, waiting for God. And now, now they see Jesus face to face and they know that God has set them free.

The Song of Simeon has become part of the daily prayers of the church. Many believe that it was originally a hymn sung in worship. No later than the fourth century, it was increasingly used in the evening prayers and night devotions of the church. The song has been used in that way in every edition of the Book of Common Prayer, beginning from the very first one in 1549. It holds a privileged place in our worship and spirituality. It ought to shape our relationship with God.

“Lord, you now have set your servant free  
to go in peace as you have promised;  
For these eyes of mine have seen the Savior,  
whom you have prepared for all the world to see;  
A Light to enlighten the nations  
and the glory of your people Israel.”

How might these beautiful words so central to our prayers, speak to us here at Christ Church Cranbrook? Well, first of all, we are not anxious about our salvation. Our salvation has already been achieved. Jesus Christ has joined us here in our flesh. He has lived and died for our salvation. He has forgiven our sins and broken the power of death in our lives. Everything, all of it has already been accomplished in Him, and so we rejoice and we sing, “Lord, you now have set your servant free.”

We share our faith, not because we're anxious about the fate of the lost, God has already taken care of all of us, but because we are so grateful to have been found by God. We bear witness to God's free gift of salvation. For God has lavished us with love, God has set us free and so we share our faith with gratitude and love in freedom rather than out of fear.

The second point I'd like to make about the Song of Simeon is that we confess that our eyes have seen the Savior. As the first letter of John puts it, we have touched Jesus with our hands. We have seen him with our very own eyes. We have tasted and seen and known that the Lord is good. When I first came to this church, one of the first things that struck me was the physical beauty of our building and the works of art that adorn it. I'd seen pictures of course, but none of them do this place any justice.

Imagine what we are about to unveil here when the work is finished. It's just about finished. Some of you have been looking at it for years. Imagine what our frescos will look like, restored and brightened. The beauty of our church building is staggering. It is awe inspiring. Our worship appeals to all the senses. Think about the glorious music we hear. The grand and serene beauty of this place leads us to God for spiritual transformation. Truly, this is a community where we meet Jesus, find joy, share beauty, and serve others.

Every detail of our worship points us to the presence of Jesus, especially His body and blood, but also His gathered community. We've been given a deep joy in the presence of flesh and blood siblings. To us, they are beautiful sacramental signs of Jesus, the Word made flesh in our flesh. They are our teachers in the school of love, tangible and visible signs of God's call to live as neighbors. Here at Christ Church Cranbrook, we see the beauty of God who calls us together in one human family.

In a world of violence, greed, and fear, where bombs are dropped on civilian neighborhoods, where peaceful protestors are gunned down, and where our neighbors still shiver and hunger in the streets, God has shown us a new and better way to live. God is inviting us even now to live more neighborly lives, and if need be to lay down our lives for each other.

And that brings me to the third and final point about the Song of Simeon. In it, Jesus is said to be both a light to the nations and the glory of God's people Israel. The nations are the Gentiles. That means non-Jews who were generally considered unclean at the time of Jesus. Jesus is the glory of Israel as well, but He is a light to the nations. The nations are the outsiders who've been gathered in through His life and death for others. William Temple, who was Archbishop of Canterbury during the Second World War, once said that the church is the only human society that exists for the sake of those who don't yet belong.

Here at Christ Church, God is calling us to welcome all sorts and conditions of people. We are a community that places a high value on inclusion. Our commitment to welcoming all people flows directly from the teaching and example of Jesus. That means people who come from near and far. It means people who don't look like us or share our background or experience. It means people who don't think like we do, people who disagree with us, who challenge us. It means people who don't pray or love the ways we do. It means absolutely everyone, no exceptions allowed.

And that brings me back to the presentation of our Lord Jesus Christ in the temple. When Jesus is presented there, Simeon and Anna welcome Him with joy. He is at home. He is in God's house, and according to the prophet Isaiah, the house of the Lord shall be a house of prayer for all people. It shall be for people of every tribe and every language, every family and nation. That's God's vision for humanity.

In scripture, the temple is not just a building. However beautiful and magnificent, it is never just a building. The temple of the Lord is us. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit. We are the place where God dwells. We are the body of Christ and Jesus lives in us. Today we celebrate this fact for Gracelyn. And we are reminded of the gift of our own baptism, that God loves us that much, that God so loved the world. We remember that Jesus lives in us and we in Him. As we meditate on Simeon and Anna receiving the gift of Christ, we let their words become our own. Once again, we receive Jesus into our hearts and lives. And we do that best by sharing His love with others.

That's the great theme of this missionary season, when the light and love of Jesus shines so bright for all the world to see. Today, we celebrate the forgiveness He brings us, and we remember the hope that He secures, for He is changing this

tired old world of ours into the kingdom of God. He is changing it day by day, in and through His people.

"Lord, you now have set your servant free." All that's left for us to do is to go out and live this out, to share each other's burdens, to wash each other's feet, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and let the oppressed go free. To love and serve our neighbors, all of them, especially those who are most at risk and most afraid right now.

"Lord, you now have set your servant free  
to go in peace as you have promised;  
For these eyes of mine have seen the Savior,  
whom you have prepared for all the world to see."

Amen.