

Ed Stewart

St. Augustine's Episcopal Church

First Sunday of Advent - November 27, 2016

Sermon: Romans 13:11 – 12

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. It is a time when we as a faith community look to the future. However, Advent always causes me to think about the Holy Land, the place where Jesus was born, and the place where he would become known as the Messiah. Last January I was in the Holy Land, as part of a group of 12 students from my seminary. We traveled through Jordan, Israel, and the West Bank to visit the places where Jesus conducted his earthly ministry. So as we begin this season of Advent, I wanted to talk about one particular experience of mine in the Holy Land. I was blessed to visit the Jordan River site where Jesus was baptized.

According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus received the Holy Spirit at his baptism, which marked the inauguration of his public ministry. So the image of Jesus at the Jordan River has always been resonant for me. The way that led to the Cross began down by the river...not in Bethlehem, or

Nazareth, or Galilee...but right there on the banks of the river. There's a particular spot along the Jordan where archaeologists are quite certain that John the Baptist baptized Jesus and others during the first century.

They've excavated baptismal pools and paths that lead down towards the river, and there is a place where visitors can gather to sit next to the river itself. It was without a doubt, for me, the most spiritually moving moment of our trip to the Holy Land. We had traveled halfway across the world to reach this place, in the heart of a land utterly foreign to us, yet still familiar from the Biblical stories. And now, just a few feet away from where we were sitting, was the River Jordan — the same river Joshua and the Israelites crossed to reach the Promised Land, and the same river in which Jesus was baptized. It was awe-inspiring, and for several moments we all gazed at the river in silence. One of my friends began to cry tears of joy at our good fortune to simply *be* here in this holy place.

Eventually the priest who guided us on our tour of the site invited us to enter the river itself. But no one moved — except for me, that is! I rolled up my pants legs and waded

right in — because there was no way I was going to travel this far, to a place this special, and not experience the feel of these sacred waters! Once I led, others followed, and before long we were all standing in the water, and sharing in a sense of wonder. But brothers and sisters, I'm here to tell you something — the River Jordan *is* chilly and cold, just like the song says!

Before we left the priest who accompanied us allowed us to renew our baptismal covenant in the very same waters that Jesus waded in 2000 years ago. It was profoundly spiritual, and deeply moving for all of us! But as we left we noticed something that I wish we hadn't seen. There is a significant military presence on both sides of the Jordan River near the baptismal site. The river is a militarized border that divides the country of Jordan from the Israeli-occupied West Bank. Groups of Israeli and Jordanian soldiers are stationed across from each other, dressed in camouflage and carrying automatic weapons. They remain quiet, out of respect for the religious pilgrims who are present. But their presence sends an unmistakable message: If you tried to swim across the river, you'd get shot almost as soon as you got wet!

But there is more to this story than that unfortunate juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane. The place where Jesus was baptized is near the shore of the Dead Sea — at 1,411 feet below sea level, it is the lowest point of land on the face of the earth. So when we read in the Bible that the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism, we need to emphasize the word *descend*. The Spirit was able to reach down from the highest heavens to the lowest place that any human being has ever set foot, all for the purpose of effecting God's divine purpose. There's a lesson in that for us. The Spirit of God can reach us wherever we are, whether we are celebrating our highest hopes or experiencing our deepest despair.

I've been thinking about my experience at the Jordan River lately. I've been thinking about the significance of baptism, and wondering about what it means to follow in Jesus' footsteps both in the Holy Land and here at home. I've been thinking about the sort of fears that cause us to separate ourselves from one another, to turn boundaries into barriers. And I've been thinking about how hard it is to seek the Spirit of God when you're in a very low place. Because, to be honest, since the election I've been feeling a sense of disappointment, at times verging on despair. Not only for myself and for the people I am close to, but also for the nation as a whole. You see, I've always believed that elections tell us something important about the people who have voted, and not just

about the candidates who have won or lost. So what does this past election say about us, as a people? As a country?

My overwhelming sense of America following the election is that we are a divided nation. It seems every four years we are obliged to segregate ourselves into Red States and Blue States, an artificial distinction that masks a whole host of divisions within our body politic. White vs. Black, Gay vs. Straight, Rich vs. Poor, Urban vs. Rural, Native-born vs. Immigrant — these and other fault lines have been revealed over the course of this campaign. There are some who are pleased with the outcome of this year's election, but many are disappointed and fearful with the result. What is abundantly clear to everyone, however, is that our country is a house divided. And as our Lord told us long ago, a house divided against itself cannot stand.

So what are we to do? The words of the Apostle Paul in today's reading from the 13th Chapter of Romans give me a sense of perspective, and perhaps even a bit of optimism, and so I'd like to repeat them to you today:

My brothers and sisters, it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers. The night is gone, and the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light.

As Americans, we need to come together so we can figure out what's driving us apart. The works of darkness have made us think we can exist apart from one another, when in fact our fates are intertwined. We can no longer afford to pretend that by getting along with people who look like us, and think like us, and vote like us, our progress is assured. As Christians, we have a duty to do more. We have to love our enemies, even when we think our enemies have the upper hand.

When we were baptized, we entered into a covenant. We initiated our service to Christ by becoming part of what Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has called "the Jesus movement". That movement is bigger than St. Augustine's, or the Episcopal Church as a whole. It encompasses all who belong to the Christian faith. But as Episcopalians, our role in the Jesus movement is grounded in our baptismal covenant — a covenant that explicitly calls on us to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves. We are also meant to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being. Not just some persons, or particular categories of human beings. We have a duty to help all people flourish. We have a duty to seek reconciliation. We have a duty to transcend the very divisions that I've been

speaking of this morning, the ones that left unchecked can only set us against one another.

Yet at the same time, we cannot capitulate to the forces of darkness, doubt, and despair. For our baptismal covenant also calls for us to renounce evil — something we will need to do loudly and clearly in the days to come. And we must do this not only for ourselves, but for our entire community. We must conquer our fears; we must remain vigilant at all times; and we must persevere in love.

That's a tall order, but I think living into our baptismal commitment is more important today than it has ever been. I think our hopes for the future, and indeed the salvation that Paul speaks of, may very well depend on it.

My brothers and sisters, today is the first Sunday of Advent. It is a season of preparation, and of expectation. It holds the promise of a new beginning! Today we enter Advent as a people and a nation in desperate need of healing. But as St. Paul reminds us, hope lies just over the horizon, in that glimmer of light that beckons us towards it, even though it may seem out of reach. So let me say it again:

Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first became believers. Let us lay aside the works of darkness, and put on our armor of light.

Amen.