

Proper 16, Year A

Exodus 1:8—2:10

Psalms 124

Romans 12:1-8

Matthew 16:13-20

Without a doubt,
there is too much bad news
in the world around us.

Near and far, there are
natural disasters;
crises of leadership;
wars and rumors of wars;
instability, hatred, and fear.

Cumulatively,
it's almost enough
to make you lose hope;
to make you lose faith;
to make you lose sight
of what's really real,
and what's most important.

At times like these, it's easy to wonder,
"Lord, are you still there?
Is there any good news left to tell?"

So let me offer you much some needed balm.
Today, I just want to tell you some good news.
I want to tell you about what God is doing right here
despite everything else you continue to see out there.
Today, I want to paint you a picture of hope and joy,
and I want to draw you into it.

How does that sound?

* * *

In order to get us there, though,
I need you to do something with me first.
Grab your prayer book
and open it to page 302.

You there? Good.

These pages should be
somewhat familiar to you.

This is part of our baptismal service.
These are the words we say and pray
every time we baptize a child at St. Anne's.

These two pages in particular are important
because it's here that you and I make
crucial, lifelong promises
on behalf of every child
who comes to these waters.

So, as though we were baptizing a child today,
I want to ask you to stand with me,
and let's rehearse these sacred vows once again.

Your job is to make all the responses,
joyfully, enthusiastically, and with gusto!

You ready?

Will you be responsible for seeing
that the child you present
is brought up in the Christian faith and life?
I will, with God's help.

Will you by your prayers and witness
help this child to grow
into the full stature of Christ?
I will, with God's help.

Do you renounce Satan
and all the spiritual forces of wickedness
that rebel against God?
I renounce them.

Do you renounce the evil powers of this world
which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?
I renounce them.

Do you renounce all sinful desires
that draw you from the love of God?
I renounce them.

Do you turn to Jesus Christ
and accept him as your Savior?

I do.

Do you put your whole trust
in his grace and love?

I do.

Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?

I do.

Now skip down past the line
to the bottom of page 303.

This is the part that matters most today:

Will you who witness these vows
do all in your power
to support these persons
in their life in Christ?

We will.

Excellent.
You may be seated.

* * *

Now, with that as our preface,
here is the good news
I want to tell you.

Several years ago,
we as a church discerned
that God was leading us
in a particular direction.

We saw more young people coming in,
and we decided that
God was calling us
to strengthen our ministry
to and with our children and youth.

We were not sure
what it was supposed to look like
or how it was supposed to work.
We just knew that it was time
to take on these promises—

to support our young people
in their life in Christ—
in a whole new way.

**So, years later, here's the good news:
St. Anne's is swarming with children.
Y'all, we are *swarming* with children.**

You might not be able to see it
every Sunday morning.
You may not see the evidence of it
at this particular service
on this particular day,
but if you come on a Wednesday night,
what you will find is a campus
filled with kids.

There's a handful of teenagers
learning about life and faith
and exploring the hard questions together
as they prepare for Christian adulthood.

There are ten to twelve middle schoolers—
weird, funny, ridiculous middle schoolers—
laughing and learning,
clamoring and fighting over
who gets to lead worship from the prayer book
at the end of every Wednesday night.

And best of all,
there are thirty-five to forty little kids—
yes, you heard that right,
thirty-five to forty
kindergarteners through 5th graders—
running around,
learning their Bible stories,
learning to love one another,
and learning to think of St. Anne's
as a safe place,
a happy place,
a place where they want to be.

This is such good news.

And why is it good news?
Well, you may be tempted to think

of it as the kind of good news that says,
“Huzzah! We’ve done it!
We’ve finally figured it out!
We’ve finally arrived!”
But that’s a false line of thinking
that only takes good news
and turns it into cheap, fleeting pride.

No, this is good news of a whole different sort.

**It’s good news because
it means that God has entrusted
the care and nurture
of these vibrant young souls . . .
to us.**

This is a call we must take seriously
for “to whom much is given,
much will be required.”¹

It is our *job* and our *joy*.

At a time when the Pharoahs of this world
are alive and well—
when everyone seems so ruled by fear,
when it feels like hope is on the decline—
it is our *job* and our *joy*
and to show these children
a more excellent way.
Like the midwives of Egypt,
whom we heard about in today’s Old Testament reading,
we are called to salvage them from Pharoah’s schemes
and offer them a life of faith and hope.

It is our *job* and our *joy*
to teach them,
as St. Paul says in today’s epistle,
“Do not be conformed to this world,
but be transformed
by the renewing of your minds.”²

It is our *job* and our *joy*
to raise children who understand
that shame,

¹ Luke 12:48

² Romans 12:2

and fear,
and anger,
and cruelty,
and selfishness,
and sin,
and superiority,
and guilt,
and falsehood,
and intimidation,
and war,
and despair,
are not what we were built for,
but that we were built for love.

And most importantly,
it is our *job* and our *joy*
to raise our children to have an answer
when Jesus looks at them and says,
“Yes, but who do *you* say that I am?”

The world has all kinds of answers to that question,
but there is only one that matters:

**“You are the Messiah,
the Son of the living God,”³
the Lover and Savior of my soul.**

This is our promise.
This is our vow.
This is our *job* and our *joy* . . .
and they are here
waiting for us to teach them,
to support them,
and to show them the way.

* * *

If I have learned anything about youth ministry
over this past decade of my priestly life,
it’s that youth ministry works best
not when we hire it out,
not when we outsource it,
not when we delegate it to others,
but when we all own it together.

³ Matthew 16:16

I'm tempted to say it works best
when it's "volunteer-led,"
but that's a misnomer.

As blogger Erin Wathen recently put it,
"To volunteer means
that you are an outside resource,
stepping in to help
an organization in need."⁴
You don't "volunteer"
to help kids at church
any more than you "volunteer"
to help your own kids at home.
In both places,
you do it because
it's your family,
it's your job,
it's your joy.

Which brings me to the point
of all this good news:
We need help! □

We need help,
but the help we need is simple.

For years and years
many of you have stood in this place
and made vows to
"do all in your power
to support these children
in their life in Christ."

On the surface,
such a promise may seem daunting,
but here are some simple things you can do.

If you're a PARENT:

Be involved.

Help out.
Give an hour of your time
one Wednesday a month.

⁴ Wathen, Emily. "Your Church Does Not Need Volunteers." Irreverin. Patheos. 20 April 2017. Web.
<<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/irreverin/2017/04/church-not-need-volunteers>>

Be responsible.

Sign your kids in and out.
Don't just drop them off.
Make sure we have the info we need.
With more kids comes a need
for greater parental responsibility.

Bring faith home.

The most important altar
in your child's life
is not the altar in this church,
but the altar of your kitchen table,
where faith and family meet in conversations that matter.

Likewise, the most important minister
your child will ever have
is not me, or Rev. Ellen,
or anyone else,
but *you*.

Ask your kids what they're learning,
and talk to them about your faith.

If that sounds intimidating,
think of it the same way
you think of helping your kids
with their homework.

Maybe you don't remember much
about how to multiply fractions,
but you relearn it along with your kids
to help them learn it, too.

Likewise, you may not remember much
about the ten commandments,
the miracles of Jesus,
or the meaning and mystery of the Trinity,
but you relearn it along with your kids
to help them learn it, too.

Don't just outsource
the formation of your children's faith.
Bring it home.
Be a part of it.

If you're a PARISHIONER:

Maybe you're not a parent.
Or maybe your parenting days
are far behind you,
and you're thinking,
"This is fine, but
I've done my part."

But the truth remains that it still takes all of us.
Here are two simple things you can do.

Provide presence.

An increase in kids requires
an increase in adults.

We're not even asking you to teach.
Simply having more adults in the room
on Wednesday nights
aids in the supervision of our children.

Of course, anyone who volunteers
is required to complete
[Safeguarding God's Children](#),
our online abuse prevention training.
It's simple, thorough, and informative,
and it's the least we can do to make sure
we maintain a safe, accountable environment
for the sake of our children's wellbeing.

Provide dinner.

On Wednesday nights
we've begun to serve a simple parish wide supper,
not only for our kids,
but for *all* who wish to come together and eat
before youth programs, choir, and worship.

That may sound like a lot of people to prepare for,
but we've learned that it works well
when we just keep it simple.

Your big pot of spaghetti,
or your platter of chicken nuggets,
or your tray of sub sandwiches
goes a long way in bringing our parish together.

Something wonderful happens
when the family comes together
around a simple meal.

If you're interested in signing up
to provide Wednesday night supper,
visit our [online signup form](#)
or speak with Rev. Ellen.

Just ask.

Maybe there's something else you can do,
some other way you can contribute.
Want to help, but not sure how?
Just ask [Nicky Lamb](#), [Shelly Schmeisser](#),
[Rev. Ellen](#), or [me](#).
We'll be happy to help you
find the best way to offer your gifts
for the sake of St. Anne's youth and children.

* * *

As I said at the outset,
our world is a dangerous place,
and it's not always easy to see
where God is moving in the midst of it.

But here in this place,
our years of prayers are being answered,
and there is new life,
new vitality,
and plenty of good news
being made real
in the lives of our children.

So come,
and answer your vows
not just with your words
but with your life.

Will you do all in your power
to support these persons
in their life in Christ?

We will.

Thanks be to God,
and amen.