Sermon: Year B – Advent 2 – December 10, 2017: The Warm Ponds in Puna

As many of you know, before I came back to the Cathedral I spent five and a half years in Hilo. When I lived in Hilo and I needed a break from things, I used to love to drive down to the district of Puna, along the shores of Kalapana, and go into what they called the warm ponds. The warm ponds are geothermal, heated by the volcano, and when you step into them they are naturally heated to about 90° and they enfold you in their warmth.

I’ve taken many guests down there, including clergy colleagues, without telling them what they were going to experience. And it’s always fun to watch them brace for the cold water and then discover that it’s warm and then to see the smiles on their faces and their delight as they plunge in and envelop themselves in the comfort of those warm waters.

Whenever I go into the warm ponds, I forget about myself – all my worries and all my concerns, and I just bask in the magnificence presence of God and God’s creation, God creation that made those warm ponds. And when I do that it reminds me of the comfort I find in the waters of my baptism as well as the line in the Gospel of John where John says, “Now I must decrease so that he might increase.” For me, those words are embodied and come to life when I go for a soak in the warm ponds. I decrease. I forget everything about myself and then the presence and the magnificence of the presence of God increases and comes in and takes over my body and my soul.

And when that happens I’m free – free from all my worries and concerns and free to be with God as completely and fully as I can. And when I’m in that space, nothing matters; nothing but God.

And then when I hear this line for this passage from today’s Gospel, I am immediately teleported to the River Jordan in the Holy Land. I’ve been there twice and both times that I’ve been there I’ve waded into the river itself and gone up to my knees. You have to bear in mind that the River Jordan is in the middle of a very dry and arid desert – and it’s hot, even in the winter. And both times when I stepped into that water it was bone chilling cold, and I could feel the cold actually reach my bones and the inside of my bones and the little air pockets in my bones. And then both times when I stepped out, in some interesting metaphysical and or spiritual kind of way, that sensation of cold stayed with me for several days and I was reminded of a baptism that I don’t even remember but whose waters comfort and sustain me through life’s challenges in life’s trials and uplift me through life’s triumphs. Somehow the waters of my baptism help me to stay focused on God and I feel baptized not only by water but by the Holy Spirit.

So, sometime during this short season of Advent, I invite you to take a moment from the hustle and bustle of life and the holiday season and focus on your baptism – a baptism that you may remember or that you may not; and simply be in the presence of those waters that you can recall in your soul and to ask God to come in and be present to give you the freedom to be all that you can be for God.

“Our beloved Church regards her children as having bodies as well as souls to be cared for, and sanctions the consecration of these and all that is beautiful in nature and art to the service of God.” - Queen Emma
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Remember your baptism. Enjoy that time and place. Bask in those waters. Envelop yourself in their comfort and warmth. I know that you are worthy, loved, valued, and saved.

The last time I was at the River Jordan I came out of the water and noted how desolate the place was and how I almost had it all to myself, except for the presence of two Israeli soldiers with machine guns who were standing guard against anybody who might want to crossover from the Kingdom of Jordan, which was literally 20 feet away and on the other side of the river’s banks. They sat there with their machine guns, because that day except for me, there wasn’t anybody to guard against because tourists and pilgrims are going to the Holy Land like they used to.

And as I sat and watched them, a small white dove hopped over in the hope of probably getting some piece of bread or something from the two of them. And they sat there and checked out the dove and smiled; and it was a wonderful symbol of peace and the possibility of peace and a hope for peace. To me, it was the effect of those waters in the power of what they did for Jesus what they do for you and me and what they can do for the world.

So, remember your baptism and pray for world peace for all God’s people to feel the profound effect of the spiritual gift of those waters, the waters in which Jesus was baptized by John and where John proclaimed:

The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

Remember your baptism.

Amen.