



The Cathedral of St. Andrew - Honolulu

Sermon: Year C – First Sunday after Epiphany – January 6, 2019: Jumping into the Water on the Shores of Kahoolawe

Why did Jesus get baptized? Was it necessary for his salvation? I don't think so. He was the Son of God, after all. And he was without sin. So why did Jesus get baptized? Maybe it was to show us something. And if that's so, what is that something he wanted to show us? When I think about it, I wonder if it was to show us how to use our freedom, our free will, to use it to become humble, to empty ourselves as much as we can so that God can enter in to that emptiness. Maybe Jesus wants to show us that it's our call to become open and vulnerable, letting go of all need to appear perfect and just and good. He was willing to do that. That's how badly He yearned to enter into and fully experience the humanity in His midst – you, me, all the people of God.

He became willing. And, let me tell you, that's not easy to do, to enter into the water.

I can think of many times when I've been asked to go into the waters, not only the waters of baptism, but into actual waters, the ocean, waters that turned out to be a spiritual baptisms in a subtle sorts of ways, the heavens opening up and the Holy Spirit descending. I remember jumping off the pier in Kalaupapa. I also remember jumping off a boat in Fiji and into the deep ocean whose bottom I couldn't even see, all the while wondering if there might've been sharks lurking around.

A couple of weeks back I talked about seeing the reflection of Venus shimmering on the waters off Kaho'olawe in 2007 when I took 14 kids from Seabury Hall to plant a'ali'i bushes with the kids along the island's northern slopes in an effort to hold the soil and keep it from eroding into the sea and choking the coral reefs around the island where the fish live and grow.

After one particularly hard day's work on that same trip, we got to wash the dust and dirt off our bodies in the beach at Honokanaia Bay, taking the sand from the ocean bed and rubbing it over our hands, feet, legs, arms, and faces to get the dirt off of us that'd stuck to the sunscreen we had to put on ourselves. The kids had no problem jumping in, but I was nervous, especially where the sand churned in the water after having been warned never to "lurk in the murk" because that's where the sharks hung out to mate.

So, I stood on the shore and watched. But pretty soon the kids started body surfing in the waves—something I'd always wanted to try but never actually had the guts to do. It was like I'd feel too out of control or something. Who knows?

So, I watched and smiled, feeling just a little bit envious. And pretty soon the kids started yelling to me, "Come on in God Man." That's what they called me—God Man, like I was some kind of super hero or something like that, flying around in a cape with a big "G" on my chest. I didn't want to go in, but at the same time I really did want to go in. And finally, I caved.

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I took a deep breath avoided the murk, swam into the waves and asked the kids to show me what to do. “When the wave comes, start swimming,” they said. “Then it’ll push you to shore.” I thought they were nuts. But pretty soon a wave came along. I started swimming and it caught me and pushed me toward the shore. And then it covered me and I came out of it and took a breath of fresh air before letting out a huge whoop yelling, “Whoop hoo!” I’d done it. I’d conquered the fear and opened myself up to the thrill. I went into the waters and died to my fears. I emerged from the waters feeling joyous. Who could ask for a better baptism than that?

And after that, things were different with the kids. The authority figure who wanted to stay safe and in his fear became the minister who emptied himself of those fears, mustered up some courage, and became willing to be part of the team and join in the group. And later on, when we finished planting a thousand a‘ali‘i bushes, the kids asked me to take some water and a ti leaf and bless every single one of the plants so that they would grow. And:

The heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “With you I am well pleased.”

I remember it like it was yesterday.

You know, I could’ve stayed on the shore where it was safe. But I’m glad I used my free will to make a different choice—the choice to conquer my fears and to enter in—and to enter in not only to the waters, but into relationship with those kids. When I run into them today, they still talk about my body surfing with them—well over ten years later. And it makes me wonder: when we withhold from entering in, what are we cutting ourselves off from? What are we missing out on in our lives? Intimacy? Relationships? Spiritual experiences? Community? Courage? Fun? Joy? The presence of God?

I marvel at my life here at the Cathedral. Amazing things happen here – and I’m fortunate enough to notice them.

We work together and a thousand people come through our doors and feel the presence of God on Christmas Eve. A young couple comes to get married and as they’re saying their vows I look out the door and notice a light Hawaiian blessing kind of rain falling down from the sky. A beloved pet dies suddenly and we gather here in the sanctuary with family and friends to express our sadness, offer prayers of thanks, and support one another in a time of grief that others might say is trite, but that we know is real. And it all makes me realize that this Cathedral is a place where people connect—connect with one another, and connect with God.

That’s what can happen if and when we choose to let go. And when we let go of the fear and enter in, think of the holy possibilities will we open ourselves up to – as a parish and as a church. Transcendent worship. Vibrant outreach. Uplifting music. Overflowing pews. Warm and genuine hospitality. Youth who want to come to church. Healthy, honest, and open relationships. Intimacy. Courage. Faith. Hope. Love. Joy. The presence of God. When we let go, think of the holy possibilities we open ourselves up to.

They’re almost limitless. And, with you, it’s so much fun to discover not only what they are, but also what they might be.

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So, come to the table and come to the waters. Empty yourselves and come. Come and taste. Come and see. Come and be inspired. Come and be renewed. Come and be empowered. Come and be joyful. Come and be restored.

And then go forth into the world as a disciple with faith and in faith to make disciples of others in God's kingdom – those who are hungry, those who are needy, those who are desperate, and those who wait and yearn for you to be God's loving hands in their midst – as you see the heavens open up and feel the Holy Spirit descends upon your ministry and into your Christ-filled lives.

Amen.