

Sermon for April 3, 2016 (Pascha 2, Year C)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: Revelation 1:1-8; Psalm 150; John 20:19-31

Title: The Sacraments

Alleluia. Christ is risen! ***The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!***

Alleluia is what we say in these Great Fifty Days, because this is a season for joy, lightness of spirit, perhaps even some laughter!

And in case you did not know, "Alleluia" is a translation of the Hebrew phrase which means "Praise the Lord."

Many things get lost in translation, of course. Communication is one of the great challenges of life.

Once, a preacher down south was giving a temperance sermon. With great emotion, he wrapped up his talk and said, "If I had all the beer in the world, I'd take it and pour it into the river!" With even greater emphasis he said, "And if I had all the wine in the world, I'd take it and pour it in the river!" And, finally, on a roll, he finished by saying, "And if I had all the whiskey in the world, I'd take THAT and pour it into the river! Amen!"

Sermon now complete, the preacher sat down, satisfied that he had made his point. But the music director stood up next and announced with a grin, "For our closing song, let us sing Hymn #364: 'Shall We Gather at the River'."

Of course, that hymn is about Baptism, back in the days when about the only place where you could baptize an adult was in the river! To be baptized is an important step for someone to take, and one ought to be properly prepared for this.

One time a pastor asked a man if he was ready and prepared for his baptism. The man replied, "Yes, I believe I am. My wife bought sandwiches and made a cake." "That's great," the pastor replied, "but I'm thinking about the spirit." "Oh, there's no problem with that," the man said. "We've got both vodka and bourbon."

(Why are all these jokes about alcohol anyway?)

But seriously, in ancient church tradition, these Great Fifty Days are a time for mystagogical catechesis. What that means is instruction in the mysteries, which is a really fancy way to speak of teaching about the sacraments – primarily the sacraments of baptism and communion.

The goal of all this instruction is for our real everyday lives, the ones we live in our homes, to be shaped by the way of Christ.

Sean was a young boy who was driving home with his family after the Baptism of his baby brother at the local parish, and he was sobbing and crying all the way home in the back seat of the car. At least three different times, Sean’s father asked him to explain what was the matter, but he wouldn’t stop crying.

Finally, as they pulled into the driveway, Sean cried out, "Father John said that he wanted all of us kids brought up in a Christian home (sniffle, sniffle), but I want to stay with you guys!"

The foundation for all of this instruction is faith, which is basic, gut-level trust in the all-surrounding presence of God. Some people find that difficult.

Once there was an ardent atheist who loved to fish, and he was up on Moosehead Lake enjoying a beautiful day out fishing and catching some really nice lake trout. But all of a sudden, a GIANT water monster came up under his boat and THREW the man up into the air!

Below him, the atheist fisherman could see the giant creature with a big mouth full of teeth directly below him, right where he was beginning to fall toward the water. And so he cried out, "Oh, God! Help!"

And suddenly, even more amazing than the lake monster, the whole scene froze instantly with the fisherman being suspended in the air and the lake monster down below him. And a voice boomed out of the clouds, "John, John, why are you calling out to me now? You’ve never believed in me before!"

And the quick-witted fisherman replied, "Give me a break, Lord! Until a minute ago, I never believed in giant water monsters either!"

Sometimes it is really difficult to teach our children about faith, and sometimes parents and grandparents need to resort to extra methods of motivation to make sure that this happens.

Once there was a grandmother who sang in the choir, up in a loft similar to ours. Her 8 year old grandson was in town and she REALLY wanted him to join her for worship, but she was uneasy about leaving him sitting all alone by himself. So she persuaded her husband, the boy's grandfather, to sit with him. The thing is, he was not a church-going kind of guy. In fact, when he did go, he always seemed to fall asleep and snore rather loudly during the service! It was quite embarrassing for her, so she had to figure out a plan. She promised her grandson a dollar if he kept his grandfather awake throughout the entire liturgy. He agreed, and she was happy, but during the sermon, she could see her husband's head nodding off to the side and she could even hear a bit of his snoring – from all the way up in the choir loft! It was horrible for her, and as soon as the final hymn was over, she hurried to her grandson to let him know that he would not be getting that dollar after all! The boy shrugged and said, "That's okay, because grandpa gave me 5 bucks to let him sleep!"

It's always better when a family is working together, and pulling together in the same direction. Sometimes, we men forget about this crucial task.

One man finished work on a Friday afternoon and a few co-workers invited him to go hunting for the weekend up at their camp. So he did, but he failed to clear this with his wife ahead of time.

He stayed out the entire weekend hunting with the boys and spending quite a bit of his paycheck on beer and food.

When he finally came home on Sunday night, he was confronted by his angry wife who really laid into him for over an hour.

Eventually, she slowed down and simply asked, "And how would YOU like it if you didn't see ME for a couple of days?"

The man wasn't in the right frame of mind then to answer this question correctly, and so he said, "Well, that would be fine with me!"

And that's what happened. Monday went by and he didn't see his wife. Tuesday and Wednesday came and went with the same results.

Finally, on Thursday morning, the swelling went down just enough so that he could see her out of the corner of his eye.

Ouch.

Once, a pastor was preaching a series on the 10 commandments and the next week the text was to be the ninth commandment: Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor / You shall not be a false witness.

The pastor explained that he would be preaching about the sin of dishonesty and lying. In preparation, he asked them all to read the 17th chapter of Mark at some point during the week.

When the next Sunday came around, the pastor stood up for the sermon and asked for a show of hands from all of those who read Mark chapter 17 during the week. A number of hands went up, and the preacher began: "Well, then, I am so grateful that you are here this morning, because there are, in fact, ONLY 16 chapters in all of Mark!"

We clergy are tasked with the job of instructing people in the faith, but sometimes practical concerns can cloud our vision.

Muldoon lived alone in the Irish countryside with only his dog for company, that is, until the old dog died one day.

So Muldoon went to the parish priest and asked, "Father, me dog is dead. Could ya be saying a mass for the poor creature?"

Father Aidan replied, "I'm afraid not. We can't have services for an animal in the church. But, you know, there are some Baptists down the road, and there's no telling what they believe! Maybe they'll do something for the creature."

Muldoon nodded and said, "Thank you, Father. I'll go right away. And tell me, do ya think \$5000 is enough to donate to them for the service?"

"Sweet Mother of God!" Father Aidan responded, "Why did ya not tell me the dog was Catholic?"

Speaking of Catholics, how do you know when you've met a Catholic who is a convert from Judaism? It's quite simple, really: this guy never misses Confession on a Saturday, but he always brings along his lawyer, just in case.

I know, I know, that's a horrible joke, but I'll bet you Donald Trump would love it!

Seriously now, catechesis is all about instruction in the way to live a full and abundant life in Christ.

This is something that we promise to do together for Helena being baptized here today, for one another as members of this parish family, for the Draeger and Fulton

families who will come forward later this morning to be enrolled as candidates for baptism in June.

Short, memorable instructions are always useful in any context, and especially nowadays in this age of Twitter and social media.

So let me leave you this morning with the Bible explained in 50 words – 25 sentences of 2 words each. Easy to remember. Ready?

God made. Adam bit. Noah built. Abraham split.

Jacob fooled. Joseph ruled. Bush talked. Moses balked.

Pharaoh plagued. People walked. Sea divided. Tablets guided. Promise landed.

Saul freaked. David peeked.

Prophets warned. Jesus born. God walked. Grace talked.

Anger crucified. Hope died. Love rose.

Spirit flamed. Word spread. God remained.

And still God remains. And that, my friends, is very good news! Alleluia! Amen.