
New Life is Messy: Baptism and All Saints Sunday

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
All Saints Sunday

I love these babies about to be baptized! I had a little baby once - that is to say, my wife did. She had three, wonderful children! Not only did my wife bear our children, of course, but I must admit that it was she who did most of the tending and mending.

I shall never forget one of the first visitors to our home, just after our first child had arrived. We were quite typical first-time parents, at one moment knowing everything to do and at the next moment not knowing a thing. Every day, we were poised between wonder and terror. We appreciated the family and friends who dropped by to marvel.

But one friend dropped by with that comment I shall never forget. This friend was a woman, quite a dear person herself. But she had never had a child, had never raised children. We could tell as much when she peered at our little daughter. She did not quite trust herself to hold our child (so we didn't trust her either).

Our friend admired the baby for the correct amount of time. And then, then, she looked up and said, "Oh my, she sure does drool a lot."

She drools. Well, of course she drooled a lot! She was a one- month old child! She was new life, adjusting to this world of daily intake and outflow, charm and dirt, order and mess.

What a tremendous change that first-born child presented to our lives. I know that marriage changes lives, and I tell every couple whose marriage I officiate, that same thing. Marriage, the lifelong commitment of two people to one another, really does change you.

But not like a new child. Our lives *really* change when we introduce a child into our relationship, into our household, into the world. Suddenly, we are responsible not just for another adult life, but also for another little life - a helpless, vulnerable, and tender life.

When a child enters our world, life suddenly gets a lot messier. There are accidents and spills. There is blood and all manner of bodily fluids. Every day there is a different smell, a different odor, in the house. New life drools a lot. New life is simply messy. It is messy, and it is wonderful.

When we baptize these children this morning, I expect there will be some drools, maybe some messes. There may be tears and loud cries. There will be episodes that shake our order that might even upset us.

All those messes and sounds, however, will not be signs of chaos. To us who are Christian, they are signs of new life.

Many of us remember the story of Lazarus in the old King James Version of the Bible. Today, we use more recent translations of scripture, but that old King James Version still contains some treasures. One of its treasures is the word that

Martha uses when Jesus comes to the tomb of Lazarus.

Jesus, remember, loved Lazarus - and he loved Mary and Martha, too. His disciples come up to inform Jesus that Lazarus has died. Jesus weeps at the tomb. "See how he loved him," they exclaim. Then Jesus says, "Take away the stone."

And here is the word. Lovely Martha, lovely Martha the housekeeper who knows all about the daily routines of life, says, "Lord, he's been dead already for four days. He stinks!" That's how the King James Version translates it. Except it says, "He stinketh!"

Yes, Lazarus stinks. There is an odor. We might acknowledge the same thing around some of this new life around us this morning.

New life always occurs around something that stinks. There is a stench.

Most of us flee from foul odors. We get away from things and people that smell badly. Most of us do not choose to sit around the homeless shelters and soup kitchens that are so saturated with body odor and uncleanness.

But Jesus does not shy away from the smells, or from the crying infants, or from the smelly homeless. Four days ago, on All Saints Day, this Cathedral invited the homeless of Atlanta into our sacred space. This place really smelled on Wednesday night. That's because it was All Saints Day. We were celebrating new life together.

Resurrection occurs where it smells bad, where there might be an odor, where the world is so messy that we might rather just avoid the whole thing.

I imagine that, when Lazarus emerged from the tomb, he did more than smell bad. I imagine that folks around Lazarus couldn't even see him well. The scripture says that his hands and his feet were bound with strips of cloth, and his face was wrapped in a cloth. He looked like a scary mummy on Halloween.

But he was alive. He was resurrected. He had been dead and now he was alive. He was certainly born again, but his new life was not entirely begun until his people, his community, took some action, too. They had to unwrap him.

So Jesus says, in the last words of today's gospel, "Unbind him, and let him go!" Resurrection takes community action, too. Resurrection is not just another sanitary miracle; resurrection is not sterile. Resurrection is not something we can watch on television without getting involved.

Resurrection requires that we get our hands dirty, that we reach out and touch the new born infant who is drooling, that we reach out and touch the smelly homeless woman looking for new life! Resurrection requires that we unwrap the man who is bound with the bandages of old life!

The best saints show us all this. Through the dirt and trials and smells of life, the saints of God show us Resurrection. But the best saints also involve and inspire us to action. The best saints involve and inspire us to resurrection.

These babies, these new saints we baptize this morning, also inspire us to action. In fact, they require our action. There are times, of course, when we must wrap them up. But there will be times, too, important times, when we will have to unwrap them, unbind them, and let them go.

This, all this, is resurrection. All these things - odors and drools, excitement and worry, cleaning and unbinding - all these things are signs of new life, signs of resurrection. May God bless these saints, who show us Jesus Christ, who show us resurrection.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler

Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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