

Saint James Day, 25 July 2010
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Rags Ragan, Rector

Welcome to our Patronal Feast – the day when we honor our patron saint, James, son of Zebedee, brother of John, disciple of Jesus and apostle, with his brother nicknamed one of the "Sons of Thunder". Sometimes we lament having our festival in the middle of summer because always many of our number are traveling. We would love to have more of our people here for this day when we honor our patron and celebrate our own communal life.

What we do to celebrate says a lot about what we think about our patron, and especially about our church community.

We wear red because that is the liturgical color of this festival – red both for the Holy Spirit, because James was an Apostle, and for blood, because this James was the first among the Apostles to be killed for his allegiance to Jesus Christ.

We ring bells with each Alleuia in the service because this is one of our specially festive days.

We have Alleluias in the pews today because, as during Easter we fill the liturgy with this word of praise reminding us of the Resurrection. This time the Alleluias have a scallop shell with water dripping from it (as we have on the front of today's bulletin.) Scallop shells have long symbolized Saint James because they are found in great abundance on the seashore near Compostela, the great pilgrimage site in Spain where the saint's mortal remains are said to rest. This shell was first a symbol for Saint James' pilgrim site and then expanded to become the symbol for pilgrims everywhere.

So the shells in the pew and on the bulletin and on our name tags remind us that we are pilgrims in life, always on a journey toward the Holy, toward God.

But these particular shells have water drops, making them also symbols of baptism, reminding us of the silver shell with which we will drop water on Carys and everyone who comes to us seeking to become one with Christ – and with us. For baptism is one of the ways we celebrate our saint's feast day. We light the Paschal Candle, with the light of Christ's resurrected life. We bless the water with gratitude for the gift of life in creation, gratitude for the liberation from oppression God offered to the Israelites in leading them through the parted waters into freedom, gratitude for Jesus' life, death, and resurrection offering us a whole new relationship with God. We invite Carys and her family to come forward and join our pilgrim band, and invite the Holy Spirit to bless her.

Another element of our Patronal Festival is adoption of new members. *At the 10am service* Carys will become part of our family by her baptism. Then after the blessing we will welcome other parishioners who are already baptized, who have found a home here with us and wish to make a public declaration of that fact. So we will rejoice with them and pray for them.

Celebrating this special feast, this parish equivalent of a birthday party, also has several elements that stretch beyond our worship service. Yesterday we had a workday in which members of the community worked in the gardens and in the building, to make everything beautiful for the party, because part of what we celebrate is our commitment to life together. Like a family, we share responsibility for our space.

Another traditional aspect of our celebration is to choose a project to benefit the community around us.

So this year, like last year, we are collecting clothes and books and other needed items for the Caring Closet, to assist students throughout the school district. Part of our calling as the people of God is to care for our neighbors, which we include in our celebration.

And then of course there is always a party after the main service. As at Easter we have a Favorite Finger Food Feast – a party because this is like a birthday.

Those things all happen every year. This year we have added two more things *to our 10am service* to make our celebration even more festive. [You have no doubt noticed how lovely the sanctuary looks with all the quilts.] Our quilting group, which does such extraordinary work, received a hospital request and had the quilts ready to send – except that we always bless them before sending them. Because each quilt we send off goes with the prayers and blessings and love of our whole community. So this Saint James Day includes quilt blessing.

Finally, by an accident of the calendar [today] is our day to celebrate Samantha Schuh and send her off with our blessings as she takes off for her year abroad.

So many things to celebrate, so much joy and fellowship. Even with numerous parishioners off on their vacation travels, this celebration is a lovely representation of what we are and what we love at Saint James.

Something we have also included in our Saint James Day celebrations – because like a birthday it is the beginning of a new year for us – is to announce an annual theme. We have had a year of Prayer and a Year of Joy and Celebration. This year the Vestry (and other parishioners) wanted to declare another special year. After prayer, thought, and discussion, it was decided to begin today a Year of Hospitality.

This does not necessarily mean that we will be having parties all year, although that might be fun. It does mean that we will be focusing on the important Christian virtue of Hospitality, what it means for us and how we can improve in our exercise of it.

Today's celebration gives us an excellent beginning. We have a reputation for being an exceptionally hospitable community. The genuine welcome offered to guests and newcomers is what has convinced many people to make themselves at home here.

Last week we heard about Abraham showing the wonderfully expansive hospitality necessary to desert survival. He made his mysterious and unknown guests welcome in his camp, sharing with them the best he had, of food and drink and shelter. This encounter has for millennia stood as the archetype of opening our homes

and hearts to strangers as a way to open them to God and God's messengers. Then we saw Mary and Martha's hospitality to Jesus, hospitality which welcomed him into their home, looked to his need for food and drink, but also for companionship. Mary and Martha with their different gifts and personalities, each brought something needed for the welcome.

Last week the hospitality was in the Biblical narrative. This week the hospitality is evident right here.

Baptism is always a welcome. The words and the gestures are all about including new individuals into the people of God, extending God's hospitality and our own. One distinguishing characteristic of the Christian faith is the assertion that God's loving hospitality extends to all people, that all are invited to Baptism.

Similarly the adoption could be called a hospitality ceremony, welcoming people to declare their desire to belong, and then assuring them of our support and prayer.

Hospitality means treating people as honored guests, means making them feel truly welcome and at home. With these quilts we are extending that honoring, that love, to people who may never be here in our building. Our hospitality, our generous welcome, extends beyond our own doors into the community, to everyone we touch with that spirit. So when we send along these quilts, they will carry our caring, our assurance to the people who receive them that they are loved, by us and by God. I have seen these quilts at work in hospital rooms and homes and can testify that the welcome is felt.

Hospitality also includes the blessing on departure. Hospitality does not mean locking people in and keeping them prisoner. It means welcoming them for as long as they are here. So last week we blessed Debra as she went forth on her new adventure in San Diego. She was very grateful for the generous hospitality of this community while she was here, and equally grateful for the love that goes with her as her journey continues.

Now with Samantha, we fully expect a return to our fold after her adventures in Mexico, but this is our time to extend our blessing, to assure her that her belonging among us will go with her wherever she travels.

So welcome to our Year of Hospitality. I look forward to sharing with you in our exploration of this important virtue, to growing with you to be ever more hospitable, conforming ourselves ever more perfectly to the One who welcomes us each into life and into life-giving relationship. Amen.