

The Feast of Saint James, 31 July 2011
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

Once a year we have a special day to celebrate us, our community, the people and history and future of Saint James Tigard. Like any birthday party, it is a time of joy and gifts – and perhaps some reflection.

The party aspect is seen in all our red clothing and bells and all the special food everyone makes and brings. But even more important it is seen in the adoptions and baptisms. We celebrate our community by bringing more people into it.

These annual celebrations, like birthdays, are times of gift giving. When we baptize Hannah and adopt Mary, and Paul, Christine, Mike, David, and Marina, we are receiving gifts, gifts of people committing themselves to being part of our life in Christ, our pilgrim band. And so we thank all of those choosing to be adopted, to make that public commitment to join with us in work and prayer for the Kingdom of God. We also give gifts in honor of this celebration. My family has always had the tradition of giving as well as receiving gifts on birthdays – and Saint James does the same thing. So we always have the opportunity to give to the community as part of our celebration. This year we are helping the Caring Closet of the Tigard-Tualatin School District with gifts of socks and underwear for the needy children they serve – and we are helping Community Partners for Affordable Housing with gifts of school supplies. In both cases our gifts will help children. And this opportunity to give where our gifts are especially needed adds greatly to the joy of our celebration.

I think of this celebration as a great circle dance, in which we are all holding hands, moving to the music, together. Our appreciation of the music is greatly enhanced by our shared movement, and each of us is better able to move to the music because of our connection to the other dancers. Each time a new dancer comes, we make an opening in the circle and add the new hands and feet to our circle of dance.

That is surely true of our lives as a community of faith. A popular metaphor has God as the music of the universe, or the song of the universe. And we are each invited to join in. We are each invited to bring our unique voices and feet and hands to the music. When we think of a song, we think of the harmony that is steadily enriched by each new voice. When we think of a dance, we think of the expanding circle, ever more joyous, ever more embracing. Whether a dance or a song, we are responding to God's music, the music of the universe that gives life and beauty to everything. And our participation is made richer by others. The more of us join, the richer the harmony, the more delightful the dance.

So today we are inviting Hannah into our dance, and acknowledging Paul, Christine, Mike, David, Marina, and Mary as fellow dancers. We know that they all enrich our lives together and promise that we will be with them in the dance, encourage their footsteps and their harmonies.

It is very unusual for us to have two baptism services so close together. Ruby and Libby would have been baptized today, but their parents' schedule did not permit them to be in town for Saint James Day. So they had their own special celebration two weeks – leaving Hannah to be queen of today. Having two such celebrations, culminating in our patronal feast, makes us even more conscious of the centrality of baptism for us.

Baptism is our great welcoming sacrament. In the water we recall God as not only the music of the universe, but also the source of all life. Water is central to the life of this planet. Water is also central to the story of Israel in the Exodus. Water is key to the story of Jesus among us. This water, which James and Matthew will help me pour for all to see, reminds us of all these ways in which our loving God gives life and love to us.

We speak about 'inviting people to the waters of Baptism'. It is an invitation. "Come, join us, be part of us, be connected to God in a unique and life-giving way." We welcome them in to our community, to God's family with this water.

Hannah has always been part of this community, part of our dance. The butterfly banner that her grandmother Debbie made for Hannah's parents' wedding is here again today, a sign and symbol of that union blessed in this place. Hannah is not quite old enough to be accepting the invitation to the dance for herself – so she has family members doing it for her. They are all part of the dance, our dance, God's dance, which she is joining.

Like water and dance and song, the butterfly is powerful symbol of this life we are inviting Hannah into. The butterfly has long been used as a way to help us think about resurrection. The caterpillar ceases to be a caterpillar, disappears into its tomblike chrysalis and emerges something new and beautiful, a butterfly. So our lives, with whatever struggles and limitations, are transformed into a whole new glorious life with God. So it is good to have the butterfly banner here to remind us not only of the blessing of Katie and Nick's wedding here but also of the promise to each of us of transformation and life.

Saint James the Greater, our patron saint, is also patron and focus of the great pilgrimage to Compostella in Spain. The shells on our nametags and our bulletins are the traditional symbols not only of baptism, but also of pilgrimage. And pilgrimage, like the circle dance, is about movement, and like the butterfly it is about transformation.

One cannot go on the long journey to a sacred place without being changed. The change we seek is to be drawn ever-closer to God, to be more closely connected to the people of God – to be more and more butterflies.

In the baptismal service we remind ourselves of our promises of worship and study, acceptance and forgiveness, welcome and service. In both baptism and adoption we promise to Hannah and Mary, Paul, Christine, Mike, David, and Marina – our support and inclusion, our prayers and encouragement.

We are opening the circle and extending our hands, so that we can all dance together, more and more in harmony with God's music, as we will sing at the end of our adoption liturgy, "Consider yourselves part of the family".

We have enjoyed our year of hospitality, a year in which we have focused on inviting and welcoming new members, new participants in our circle dance. In fact, we have enjoyed it so much – and feel there is so much more to do, that we have decided to extend it into a second year, beginning today.

I frequently think of the delightful saying with which people greet the day on the Holy Isle of Lindisfarne. "Though the sun rise cheerless on this isle today I walk in a path of light. I know my greatness. I can't for a moment fall out of the everlasting arms. I'm in the heart of God and I'm on my way to glory."

I want to change it just a bit for Hannah and all of those being adopted:

"Though the sun rise cheerless on your day, you walk in a path of light. We know your greatness. You can't for a moment fall out of the everlasting arms. You are in the heart of God and you are on your way to glory." Amen.