

INAUGURATION DAY (MK 1:4-11)

Sermon/Annual Report by the Rev. Corinne Hodges, Priest-in-Charge
Sunday, January 11, 2009, St. John of the Cross, Bristol

The countdown is on. Banners are printed. Hats, pins, jackets and all kinds of gear are ready. January 20 is Inauguration Day, the day when we welcome a new president of the United States. Inauguration Day is a big day for this country, especially this year when so many hopes are raised. The expectations could not be higher. An inauguration in itself is just a ceremonial introduction, but this introduction will have all the bells and whistles. Millions of people will be watching.

But not all inaugurations come with this much pomp or acknowledgement. Today we celebrate the baptism of Jesus Christ. Although it may be downplayed after the drama and excitement of Christmas, let us not forget that it too was an important day. This inaugural day marked the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, and like President-Elect Obama's upcoming day, it was witnessed by many—not on TV or in Washington, but in the River Jordan. And the climax of Jesus' inauguration was when that beautiful Holy Spirit came down from heaven and the words were heard, "You are my Son, my Beloved; with you I am well pleased." From this point on, Jesus' life took on a whole new meaning, serving God and God's people.

This story of Jesus' baptism offers us a chance to reflect on our own baptism. Most of us here, at some point at some place, received the cleansing gift of water. We were baptized in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and then through anointing we were marked as Christ's own forever. Just like Jesus, we too received the gift of the Holy Spirit at baptism. And just like Jesus, we are called to put that gift to good use for God and God's people.

Today is the day of our Annual Meeting and it is also the six-month mark since Mike and my arrival here at St. John of the Cross. It is a time when we look back on where we have been, but also set the tone of where we plan to go in the future. Our inauguration, if you will, was on Saturday, July 12, 2008, otherwise known as the Strawberry Festival. There were lots of on-lookers, well-wishers, plenty of

strawberries, whipped cream and it was obvious there was a celebratory spirit in the air. I remember meeting some of you that day, but also many others from the Bristol, Elkhart and Middlebury communities. It was a big day with lots of joy and hope—it was a great start and I thank you for that warm welcome.

I have reflected a lot on the last six months and prayed, journaled and contemplated where we might be going. In doing so, I will share with you a visual map of what I see. It has come from observation, but also from listening to your words, thoughts and feelings, to where God may be directing us at this time. It's an initial visual mapping, open to change and revision...but at least it sets a framework for us to work from.

Visual mapping is a tool I learned from a lay person on my parish discernment committee for ordination years ago. Rather than using words to explain how thoughts and ideas connect, you use geometric figures, joining them with lines and ideas. So imagine a blank sheet of paper and in the center is a big rectangle. Three ovals surround this rectangle, one on the top, one on the side, and one on the bottom. The first has the word COMMUNITY BUILDING.

Community building, we'll start there. The past six months, I have seen this community expand, grow, welcoming new people and returning members back into our fold. It has been awesome to watch. The Strawberry Social in July was the first community building effort, followed by Mass on the Grass in August, the Pumpkin Chase Race in September, the Stewardship Fair in October, All Saints and the baptism of six children in November, and then Lessons and Carols and Christmas Eve in December.

But community building is more than events. Internally, the ministries of the Altar Guild, Lay Readers, Acolytes, Chalice Bearers and others have been growing with new members. Also important in building a community is acknowledgement and appreciation. In an effort organized by Sue West, we have been sending hand-written correspondence to many people who help strengthen our church family. And we have included thank you items in The Crossings and in announcements at our Sunday

services. In the future, I envision more community building events and efforts, for example, something for Lent. Know that our vestry too will be engaging in community building, developing a strong core from which our parish family can grow.

The second oval is SERVICE. In the past six months we have had some very successful service projects. The Revermans and others once again organized both our Back-to-School Backpack and our Christmas Basket programs. Angela Bontrager headed up our Christmas Angel Tree effort. Many of you provided items for these, as well as helped with delivery, extending our reach to people in need. The ECW had a very successful holiday bazaar raising funds for St. Margaret's House.

One new effort is our Food Pantry Sundays, the first Sunday of each month. Bill and Jayne Bontrager have provided a red wagon to use and Judy Streeter graciously loads up her car with all the goods from the wagon, delivering them to the pantry. We also will have training for a new group of Lay Eucharistic Visitors later this month. These members will help serve other members who cannot attend church by bringing them Communion and news from our church family. As we grow together in the next year, I imagine there will be other ways, yet to be discovered, in which we can serve God's people.

EDUCATION is next. By and large, the area in which I have received the most requests from parishioners is for education. It's a big, broad subject, so here is what I have heard. Number one: children's formation. During the last six months, more children have been coming to church. Many of you have noticed this, yet we have no formal Sunday school for them. We must find a way to provide this! Thank you to Natasha, Mauricio and Emily who care for our nursery school children week after week. And thank you to the Barnetts and the Beans who generously provide transportation for them. But we need more help. One parishioner has offered to teach the first through sixth graders every other Sunday, but she cannot do it alone. Two others have expressed an interest in working with our teenagers. If you or someone you know are interested in this important ministry, the future of our church, please let

me know as soon as possible. If we have enough people, we can work out a rotation, where each volunteer only has to serve once a month.

There are two other areas of education I'd like to address: the first is adult ed. In the fall we held a bible study on Jesus' signs in John's Gospel. Each week we had between 10 and 14 people. Twenty different parishioners attended within the five weeks it was held. We also have started a book group. Last Thursday we met to discuss "The Shack" by William Young and we will read another book and meet again in February. We will most likely alternate between bible studies or series and book discussions. Next Sunday after each of the services, I invite all interested parishioners to share their thoughts and ideas on planning a meaningful Lent with some kind of adult education, perhaps on spiritual disciplines or healing.

Finally, the last educational area in which many people have expressed interest is in liturgical or general education on the Episcopal way. Many of you have a desire to learn why we do what we do...and I have to tell you as a priest, that is very exciting! In the year ahead, we will plan an Instructed Eucharist which explains our liturgy, an Episcopal Church 101 class, plus we will begin a "Word of the Month" quiz in The Crossings. The first word will be "crozier"...do you know what one is?

So by now you are wondering, "What is in that big rectangle in the middle?" INSPIRATION. Why do you come to church? Why are you here? In the last six months, many of you have shared that church is fun again, that you enjoy being here. I've heard over and over, "It's good to be home." This week, one person shared with me that what used to be "church" services have now become "worship" services. She has discovered that powerful difference and is so grateful that Sundays now have more meaning for her. Our worship is something she thinks about, talks about with others and celebrates throughout the week.

Church should do exactly that: feed us, give us life and joy, a sense of purpose, meaning, and inspiration. Now that's not to say that we may not be challenged by a sermon or fellow parishioners or certain changes, but church has to breathe life into our lives. Led by the Spirit, inspiration is at the center of it all--the community building,

the service, the education. My hope is that when you hit a low-point during the week, you will draw back on what happened at church, you will remember the words of a friend here, the peace of a hymn, the sound of the flute, guitar or mandolin, the story shared at a bible study, the laugh with a child over a donut. We all need to be inspired!

So in conclusion, these first six months have been about us getting to know each other and establishing our relationship through Christ...but it is just the start.

Relationships take time to evolve, endure and grow, so I ask for your continued patience. Much lies ahead. Let's have fun, learn as a team and grow spiritually. Let's study, discern and take risks together. The Holy Spirit will lead us and we will find our way. On this inaugural day of our new vision and dream, I hope and pray that we will do great things, but more than that, that we will continue to become great, Spirit-inspired people.