

Sermon preached by
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Accompanying the Anglican Church of El Salvador

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The Feast of the Baptism of Jesus

In the beginning. . . a wind (the Spirit) of God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said "Let there be light. . ." (Genesis 1)

A few weeks ago I was in a small village in El Salvador, a community that lived near the boarder with Guatemala, in the Western part of the country.

A friend of mine, a Salvadoran, who was about to be named mayor of the town, of which this small canton was a part, came to spend some time with the people, to listen to them, to find out what their most pressing needs were. "Water and electricity" almost all agreed. "We have neither in this canton of about 20 families. Nights were dangerous without light. And children are sick for lack of clean water."

Light and water: the stuff of the first creation.

My friend, in his firm and gentle way, said that things were about to change. Soon there would be water. Soon there would be light.

It is often hard for us to imagine living in a world of immense needs and of deep poverty, like the world in which most Salvadorans live.

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus. In early years, and even today in Eastern Orthodox Churches, the birth of Jesus, the visit of the magi and the baptism of Jesus were and are celebrated as one great festival of the revealing of God's love through Jesus the Word made flesh. It is all of one cloth.

In the days when Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem, and when John the Baptizer went out into the Jordanian desert, the world was difficult and dark. In the darkness the angels announced Good News to the shepherds in the field.

But Mary and Joseph, along with thousands of others, were making journeys they could little afford, because the Roman government of occupation ordered people to go back to their town of origin, register their names and pay an odious tax to the Roman Empire. This was a bitter experience for the Jews of Palestine.

In those days there were also painful divisions among the Jewish people, some having to do with religious differences, some with power, wealth and corruption of their leaders, and some divisions having to do with the passion of some to go into the mountains as guerilla fighters to over-throw the Romans.

The poor, the lepers, the widows, the cripple, the possessed were forgotten in all of this instability and insecurity. They were marginalized to the invisible periphery of the culture. They didn't really matter in the scheme of things. The rich got richer (especially those collaborating with the Roman authorities) and the forgotten poor got poorer.

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In this moment of history John the Baptizer, protesting a world of greed and violence, went out into the desert to proclaim the renewal of God's

Covenant with the people. There has to be a new start, a conversion of persons and society. God is tired of it all and is about to do a new thing, something that will bring shivers down the spine of those in power, and hope to the poor who have been abandoned. In this context John welcomed Jesus and baptized him, and pointed to Jesus as the sign of God's promise of renewal, of a great reversal.

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In our first reading this morning we read about the movement of the Spirit, the surprising and creative movement bringing order (cosmos) out of chaos. Out of this emerging order was born the light.

In our reading from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles we hear about an early community of believers who had not been baptized in the Spirit: that is, they were clueless, they had not yet encountered the life-transforming power of the Spirit in their lives, the Spirit who brings order out of chaos, light out of darkness.

In the reading from Mark's Gospel we remember that Jesus, standing near naked in the waters of the Jordan River was touched by the Spirit, and was called God's beloved, and commissioned to bring the Spirit and water to the dry, parched lives of the poor.

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In a world of chaos, violence and economic disorder, where do **we** find the Spirit? I don't know about your community, but I know people and communities where houses are being abandoned, jobs being lost, life savings disappearing. . . because of global chaos.

Where has the Spirit been this past week in the dreadful violence in Gaza, or the deepening crisis of Afghanistan? It is unbearable to see the pictures of this chaos in the daily news.

I can talk about the on-going chaos of life in El Salvador. Violence and gang killings increase week by week. Corruption at all levels (government, courts, police, business, NGOs) continues without signs

of change. The global economic chaos hits poor countries harder than others. And so the poor in El Salvador have even less to count on than before. Food is more expensive, education is harder to obtain, health care is more remote, and work almost non-existent.

I can talk about the chaos of immigration. Over 800 Salvadorans cross the border to go North each day. Over 300 Salvadorans are deported from the United States to El Salvador each week back to El Salvador, and that number is increasing.

I can talk about the growing loss of the Middle Class in El Salvador, the educated, entrepreneurial class that is the stability of most nations. Those professionals that remain struggle to pay their bills, get health care, and maintain their low paying jobs.

As in the beginning of creation, and in El Salvador there is enough chaos to go around.

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But where is the Spirit, the breath of God hovering over the chaos of El Salvador? Where is the Spirit that gives light?

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The Salvadoran Anglican Church, of which some of you know, is a church that years ago made a commitment to serve the poor. Through that commitment, little by little, the Spirit has been moving. Our Church, small as we are, has a nationally recognized credibility it is accompaniment of the poor. During devastating earthquakes and hurricanes, during increased gang violence and economic suffering, our church has been with the poor communities. Sometimes we can do something. Sometimes we can only show up. But this is a sign of the Spirit.

Through the help of the Fundación Cristosal a Church Office of Human Rights has been set up, and is becoming known as one of the most authentic, reliable human rights agencies in the country, in a country

without a history of either understanding or protecting human rights. This too is a sign of the Spirit.

We are completing almost a year of a several year project in the Eastern rural part of the country, called Hasta La Cosecha (until the time of harvest), a program of teaching and supporting sustainable, green farming among three communities who before had not enough to feed their people. St Francis has played the dominant role in the financial support of this project. This is a sign of the life-giving Spirit.

Several weeks ago I was in El Salvador to celebrate three events of importance to the people. The El Carmen bridge was completed, linking the rural community of El Carmen to the rest of the world during the rainy season, bringing new life to the people. A new Church building was dedicated in the urban Parish of Santa Maria Virgen, Madre de los Desamparados, in a gang -infested neighborhood being changed by the people of this parish. And just before I returned home I participated in the celebration of a new parish, funded by donations through Cristosal, serving an area near the Pacific Coast where there are no churches, no pastoral or sacramental care. We celebrated on the Feast of the Virgen de Guadalupe, the name the community wanted to use for the dedication of their new church. Over 150 persons came that day, bringing children to be baptized and young people to make their first communion, and adults to celebrate a new beginning. Signs of the life giving Spirit breathing over the turbulent land of El Salvador.

I could name other signs, but it is possible to hope once more that in el Salvador, the land of the Saviour, light is overcoming darkness, and life over death, little by little . . .and you here at St Francis are an important part of this Spirit.

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Today as we gather for Eucharist, and as we hear again the story of the Spirit hovering over Jesus of Nazareth, anointing him, calling him to bring light and life to the poor and abandoned of his day, we remember that the nourishment we receive from this bread and wine is for helping

is to bear the light, to be part of the wind of God bringing people and places to life again, places where the Spirit has been only distance memory.

I am grateful for St. Francis parish, a sign of the Spirit. In the spirit of Francis and Claire you give and give, and give again. I know the struggles churches and families are going through these days. I am sure the economic crisis has touched you too. But you have rejected being controlled by the chaos, and instead have taken the holy risk to be swept up by the Spirit.

Bless you. You are a bright light for others.

Today, remember, please remember, that we, with Jesus, are called to be transformed into persons of light, of hope, and of God's mercy. Little by little we can make a difference. A basin of water, a piece of bread, a sip of wine: a font and table where the most needy are welcome, including us. This is what we can offer. This is what we can become.//