

**GOD'S SPECIAL AGENTS**  
**THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST**  
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I want you all to take a good look at each other.

Go ahead. Look around. Do you know what who you're looking at?

You – each one of you – are looking at a person who is an integral, essential, special agent in God's plan for saving the world. Remember, someone is looking at YOU, too.

That's what the letter to the Ephesians says.

God's plan, from the beginning of time, was to be incarnated in Jesus Christ.

This beloved Son came from God and as God to redeem, to save and liberate, all creation from the agony of sin – from selfishness, violence, tyranny, fear, greed, and hatred – by bringing all people, Jew and Gentile, into one glorious body, the Church.

At the time of that letter, in Paul's view, in all the world there were only two kinds of people: Jews and Gentiles. So the plan to bring Gentiles into the Body of Christ, the Church, meant 100% of the people on the planet were part of God's plan of salvation.

The Church consists of the people who – at some level – have heard the Gospel, the good news, that love wins, that not even death can stop the power of love to transform the world, and that the Church is where we practice loving each other, and the world, until the day when all creation cries GLORY! and knows the blessing of peace.

I imagine some of you are sitting there saying, "ME? Part of God's plan? For saving the world? Ridiculous."

You want ridiculous? Think back to how ridiculous this letter must have sounded 2,000 years ago when Christians were a teeny group, often meeting in secret, shunned as heretics by the Jewish establishment, persecuted as traitors by the Roman Empire because Christians said "Jesus is Lord, and Caesar is not," and who were denigrated by everyone for following a criminal who went and got himself crucified. Pffft. Losers.

To this teeny group comes the message:

YOU are part of the body of the Christ, the one who is saving the whole world.

YOU are part of God's plan to transform the world.

YOU are going to show the rulers and powers of this world what the wisdom of GOD is!

God's wisdom is that salvation – wholeness, holiness and health – is for all.

Salvation means grace, mercy, and justice for all people, not just the elite.

Salvation means the poor are filled with good things, the blind see and the lame dance, and everyone is free. Everyone.

Nothing will stop God from saving the world, not even death.

Yes, YOU, together, as the Church, are going to show the world this.

It must have sounded preposterous, yet look what happened.

In just 400 years, Christianity went from being a highly suspicious cult to the dominant religion in the Roman Empire.<sup>1</sup> And all before Facebook was around.

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<sup>1</sup> Stark, Rodney. *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997.

Today's Collect and Scripture readings are at the end of the sermon text.

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How? Rodney Stark, a sociologist, said it was because the earliest Christians actually practiced salvation.

They nursed the sick during the many plagues that swept the Empire, even taking strangers off the street into their homes.

Followers of Jesus shared their food during the frequent famines, including with neighbors that thought Christians were losers.

They respected the dignity of every human being, including females, slaves, and lepers.

Finally, like their Lord, many Christians – certainly not all, but many – were willing to die in witness to their faith in God’s promise that death was not the shameful end, just the next step into life with God.

Also like their Lord, these martyrs died without damning their killers.

Like Jesus, some even blessed their murderers:

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Living out God’s preposterous wisdom of saving all the world through mercy, grace, compassion, justice and love, is the Church’s purpose and message to the rulers and powers of the age – whatever age the Church is in.

The Church has done much, but we’re hardly finished with the work!

And so it is that YOU are part of God’s plan.

Particularly and especially if you are baptized, you are a special agent with a mission.

As I’ve said roughly 2 million times over the years of my ministry, baptism is not fire insurance.

Baptism is the act of choosing what we bet our lives on, what love means.

We can choose the world, where we bet our lives that the one who dies with the most toys wins, and that love means we get all our desires satisfied.

Or we can choose God, and bet our lives on God’s project of healing, the promise that we belong to God, that we are precious, that God is with us always, and where love means doing what is best for the other, even if it costs us dearly or, in the case of Christ and the martyrs, it costs us everything.

When Jesus chose to go to the Jordan to be baptized, he didn’t need to change his heart and life, nor to have God forgive his sin, but certainly his baptism meant he was turning from whatever he’d been doing for 30 years to begin his ministry of preaching, teaching, healing, raising from the dead, and reconciling the world to God.

Jesus chose to begin this ministry and signified it by being baptized.

The response of Jesus’ Abba, his father, was to be delighted, and to envelope this beloved son in the holy breath, the wind, the Spirit that began creation and that is inspiring it every moment of every day.

The joy of the Father, the Son, and their Holy Spirit on the banks of the Jordan as the plan and purpose of God takes form in the life of Jesus is what baptism is all about in the life of the Church, the Body of Christ.

In our baptisms, we opt in to the plan and purpose of God to save all creation through mercy, grace, compassion, justice and love.

The secret, according to the letter, is that each one of us also has a ministry; each one of us is essential to God’s plan and purpose. No one is left out.

Brother Gregory Tristram, an Episcopal monk up in the Boston area, with the Society of Saint John the Evangelist, put it this way:

*Jesus, I believe, says to each one of us: “You are marked men and women – I’ve marked you in baptism for a purpose.*

*And I have equipped you with unique gifts, and no one else will do.”*

So, can you see yourselves as God’s special agents of salvation?

Some of us may feel really inspired: Let’s get going!

Some of us still incredulous: Who, me? Nah.

And some of us just feel guilty, echoing the words of Paul in the letter,  
certain that we are the least of all God's people,  
for we have not lived into our baptisms very well – maybe not at all.

The great thing about the Episcopal baptismal covenant  
is that it is both boldly aspirational and entirely realistic.

Look at page 304 in the *Book of Common Prayer*.

We covenant to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship –  
in other words, gather as the Church, which you're doing.

Then there's all this boldly aspirational stuff about resisting evil,  
proclaiming the gospel with our very lives, loving our neighbors,  
and striving for justice and peace by respecting the dignity of every human being.

But back there, in the second covenant, after the part about evil, it says,

*WHENEVER* [not IF, but *WHENEVER*] *you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord.*

Now, that's pretty realistic. We're gonna sin.

In our baptism, as we opt in to God's plan and claim our gifts,  
we also can trust this God with our weaknesses,

confident that God is always ready willing and able to get us back on track.

Is anyone here thinking, "No, my sin is too great. God will never forgive me."

Really? You're that powerful that your sin is greater than God's mercy?

In all the history of humanity, finally, God has met his match in you?

Let us remember Psalm 29, shall we?

We're talking about a God that created everything out of nothing,  
that is Lord of everything from hurricanes to black holes to sheep,  
and you've got the Lord stymied? Nope. Nope. And, nope.

The mercy, grace, compassion, justice and love of God are new every morning.

God will not rest until all Creation is crying "Glory!"

and the peace and good will of God rule every heart, including each of ours.

We do not undertake our missions as special agents under our own power,

but in the awesome, invincible, creative power of the Holy Spirit,

the Spirit that enfolds each of us with the words, "You belong to me.

"You are mine, I love you dearly; in you I find happiness."

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#### **COLLECT OF THE DAY**

Almighty God, you anointed Jesus at his baptism with the Holy Spirit and revealed him as your beloved Son. Keep all who are born of water and the Spirit faithful in your service, that we may rejoice to be called children of God, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and forever.

#### **ISAIAH 43:1-7**

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you;

I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth— everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

#### **PSALM 29**

Ascribe to the LORD, you gods, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

**Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his Name; worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.**

The voice of the LORD is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders; the LORD is upon the mighty waters.

**The voice of the LORD is a powerful voice; the voice of the LORD is a voice of splendor.**

The voice of the LORD breaks the cedar trees; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon;

**He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Mount Hermon like a young wild ox.**

The voice of the LORD splits the flames of fire; the voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;  
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

**The voice of the LORD makes the oak trees writhe and strips the forests bare.**

And in the temple of the LORD all are crying, "Glory!"

**The LORD sits enthroned above the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as King for evermore.**

The LORD shall give strength to his people; the LORD shall give his people the blessing of peace.

### **EPHESIANS 3:1-12**

This is why I, Paul, am a prisoner of Christ for you Gentiles.

You've heard, of course, about the responsibility to distribute God's grace, which God gave to me for you, right? God showed me his secret plan in a revelation, as I mentioned briefly before (when you read this, you'll understand my insight into the secret plan about Christ). Earlier generations didn't know this hidden plan that God has now revealed to his holy apostles and prophets through the Spirit. This plan is that the Gentiles would be coheirs and parts of the same body, and that they would share with the Jews in the promises of God in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I became a servant of the gospel because of the grace that God showed me through the exercise of his power.

God gave his grace to me, the least of all God's people, to preach the good news about the immeasurable riches of Christ to the Gentiles. God sent me to reveal the secret plan that had been hidden since the beginning of time by God, who created everything. God's purpose is now to show the rulers and powers in the heavens the many different varieties of his wisdom through the church. This was consistent with the plan he had from the beginning of time that he accomplished through Christ Jesus our Lord. In Christ we have bold and confident access to God through faith in him.

### **LUKE 3:2-3, 21-22**

During the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas—God's word came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. John went throughout the region of the Jordan River, calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins.

When everyone was being baptized, Jesus also was baptized. While he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit came down on him in bodily form like a dove. And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."

**SERMON HYMN: *I Was There to Hear Your Borne Cry***