The Rev. Dennis J. Reid  
A Sermon for Proper 16 Year B || Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69  
August 23rd 2015  
St. David's Church, Wayne PA

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

We're coming to the end of a year during which our theme has been “One Body.” For centuries, one of the most prominent ways in which the Church has claimed its identity as One Body, the body of Christ, has been baptizing new members, and today we are going to continue in this wonderful tradition.

It is a day of great celebration as the Church, the body of Christ, invites another child into the fold.

It is a day of wonder and prayer, giving thanks to God for the gifts of water, grace, and new life.

It is a day of questions, too. Avery, and those who answer for her, will hear many questions this day – it is the first time (officially, at least) that she will have them answered for her as a person of Christian faith, the earliest promises in what we hope and pray will be a long, healthy, and joyful walk with God. In this walk, her journey through this life, she will indeed hear many more questions that hopefully will elicit a similar response: “I will, with God's help.” For such an answer is the refrain of the faithful, a hopeful response in the midst of doubt, and can even be a daily reminder of God's presence with us.

Now most of us were probably baptized and had these same questions answered for us, or we answered them ourselves, yet we've probably come to find out that living out the Christian faith is not as simple as answering a few questions. Nor does every day feels like a day of celebration or thanksgiving – responding faithfully to God and the questions and circumstances of our lives is often easier said than done. Though we make a series of promises regarding our faith in God, our following in the apostles teachings, and our love and respect of our neighbors, living out these promises and turning our vocal “I will with God's help” into an active “I did that with God's help!” might be one of the most difficult notions of the Christian life, and there are many times when we try to follow God and we fail. We won't be perfect in this life, but the promises made for Avery today and the same promises that we reaffirm today for ourselves are not a declaration of our perfection before God or a certainty that we can accomplish all that we have promised. Instead, we are promising to keep trying, to continually work at living into a grace-filled series of attempts of following Jesus, with the power of God backing us all the while.

Though we may know the familiar call and response questions and answers of the Baptismal Covenant, the questions we encounter when living out our everyday lives are not so easily answered. At other moments, some of the questions in this life cannot be answered in similar fashion at all – there will always be things we don't know or can't predict: what will tomorrow bring? What kind of challenges will I face in my life? Why do bad things happen? What happens after we die? Not every question we want answered has an answer, but perhaps it is not an answer we truly require – people asked Jesus loads of questions only for him to answer with more of them himself! The questions Jesus responded with often led people away from their original questions and pointed them in a new direction – sometimes back out into the world, sometimes to look inward at oneself, sometimes to what is possibly the most important question of them all: regardless of all the other things we ask, do we believe?

We may have questions that are without answers, but that does not mean we are without hope. On a day in which we commit ourselves again to the promises we've made to God, we would do well to remember that our commitment to God is not one-sided, and that our questions are met with God's promises to us. We know Christ promises many things: “Come to me all who are weary and heavy-laden and I will refresh you;” “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them; “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Yet we
have read that many in Jesus' time must have had trouble believing his promises: even many of Jesus' own disciples respond to him in today's gospel by saying “this teaching is difficult, who can accept it?!” But to have knowledge of something, to accept it, we must have faith in it first.

We often look to Peter's example in scripture for both his steadfast faith as well as his missteps and denials, but he gets it right in today's gospel. Rather than responding by rejecting Jesus as those disciples did, Peter tells Jesus “We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” It is with great insight that Peter speaks, and the order of his words is significant – we have come to believe and know; we have come to believe then know. Our faith comes first and then seeks understanding; one cannot understand how Jesus is the Holy One of God if she doesn't first believe it to be true. We believe in God without fully knowing everything about God (or at least everything we can know about God).

Indeed, our knowledge and love of God will increase if we try to follow God, but our faith in God – the faith Avery enters into today through her baptism – precedes that understanding. This is why the Christians in Ephesus were reminded that faith must go before them in all things. Just as the order of Peter’s words is important, so too is the order of how we might understand the armor of God. We armor ourselves in preparation for our encounters, but before the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes, the helmet, or the sword, which is the first piece of God's armor to come into contact with the world? It is the shield of faith; it is faith that goes before us. With many questions and uncertainties that approach us, before we answer with truth or righteousness or our own knowledge, questions must first meet our shield, our faith. Just as we follow a shield that is before us, so will truth follow our belief, so will righteousness follow, and so will a knowledge of God and relationship with God follow.

This same faith, the one we profess each time we gather together, can go before us into the world because it has existed long before we were brought into this world. From the very beginning, God's love for us and promises to us were made known in creation, in covenants with our forebears, in the people of Israel through the prophets, in Christ the Word made flesh, through the centuries of saints who inherited it across the ages and to our present time when we pass it on through baptism this very day. The faith that goes before us and that we promise to uphold is our commitment that recognizes God's love and relationship and affirms God's promise regardless of the things we do not or cannot know. It is also why we remember (and so often repeat) that it is not alone that we are capable of such promises and knowledge – “I will, with God's help”, our repeated promise in baptism and truly, our whole lives, is not an admission of our weakness but a proclamation of God's strength; for there are many things in this life that we may not know, may not achieve, and may not perfect, but with our faith before us, we can go forward with confidence into the world, armored in that strength of God, and doing all that we can to love and serve God as members of One Body – we will, with God's help.

Amen.

Amen.