

Homily for the feast of the Baptism of the Lord

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One of the great things that I find about being a Franciscan is the community of brothers that I'm privileged to be part of. I refer not only my immediate community made up of Mike, Larry and Jean-Marie, but also to other brothers within the Holy Name Province and beyond.

They have various gifts, personalities, and often amazing life-stories.

One of the friars that I first met years ago was Keith Warner.

Before joining the friars, Keith used to work in the Pacific Northwest on a reforestation project. It is exhausting work done under harsh conditions.

It is considered among the most demanding manual labor still done, similar in difficulty to working an Alaskan fishing boat or an offshore oil rig.

Typically, Keith would climb very steep mountain slopes, through bush and logging debris with 30-40 pounds of seedlings strapped to his belt.

It would take an hour or two to plant them. Then he would go down the mountain slope, get new seedlings and do everything all over again. Over the course of 5 years, Keith has planted close to 500,000 trees.

Once he became the friar, Keith became involved with the National Religious Campaign for Forest Conservation. He collaborated with people of other faith tradition trying to stop commercial logging in the National Forests. He spoke at a congressional briefing, which focused on this issue. Keith also wrote articles and co-authored a book on the connection between the faith and the environmental concerns. The powerful witness of my Franciscan brother Keith has challenged me to explore a connection between my faith and care for God's creation.

You may respond to this, "Well, why I'm not surprised... You Franciscans are into this. After all, isn't St. Francis a patron saint of ecology? But, why talk about it today on the feast of the Baptism of the Lord?" A valid question. To answer it, I'd like you to point to the ancient tradition of the Church.

St. Irenaeus – one of the first theologians who lived in the 2nd century taught that in his baptism, Jesus anointed the whole universe with his spirit. Also in the 2nd century, St. Clement of Alexandria taught that in the baptism of Jesus, the whole world was re-created. In the 4th century, another influential theologian St. Gregory Nazianzus wrote that Jesus "opened the womb of baptism" and "renewed creation."

What are those saints and theologians telling us? They are telling us that there is far more to the story of Jesus' baptism. Somehow, everything that exists has been renewed and sanctified by Jesus Christ; caught up in the story of God's salvation.

When you and I were baptized, we've become body of Christ – one who embraces, permeates and transcends all that exists. In our baptism, we've become the body of Christ who came to lead humanity – and the rest of God's creation - toward a profound peace, love, and justice of God's Reign; far beyond what we can presently comprehend or imagine. What a great and awesome is this Christ whose body we are privileged to be part of! 14 billion years of the evolutionary history drawn by the Spirit toward the dawn of our sacred and cosmic destiny.

This sacred and cosmic destiny has a lot to do with our baptism and with the Church's mission. Being chosen as a community of God's beloved sons and daughters compels us to follow in the footsteps of Jesus who came to serve so that others may have life in abundance.

The prophet Isaiah who lived in the 6th century BC reminds us what it means to be chosen:

“Here is my servant, my chosen one upon whom I put my spirit. He shall establish justice on the earth, be a light for the nations, open the eyes of the blind, bring out prisoners from confinement...”

So many individuals here – and we as a parish – demonstrate in a beautiful way what it means to be chosen, what it means to take one's baptism seriously.

Those of you who are active in any of the ministries of our parish, please stand up. (*a round of applause*). It's truly a privilege and joy to accompany you on this faith journey in the service of the Kingdom of God.

The journey before us may be rocky, maybe steep. It may summon us, as prophet Isaiah said, “to bring prisoners from confinement.”

All too often, what confine our society are attitudes and practices that are characterized by violence and disrespect for life.

What confines our society is the belief that God's creation is nothing more than raw material, which can be exploited without limits.

What confines our nation and our state of Maryland - what hinder their vitality is our addiction to dirty fossil fuels.

Did you know that more than 60% of Maryland's electricity comes from coal?

As a result of the air pollution, 1 in 9 Maryland children suffer from asthma.

We are confined by our addiction to dirty fossil fuels, and by our unsustainable, morally untenable lifestyles.

All too often, we've allowed ourselves to be bamboozled by the oil and coal industries that spent millions on misleading studies undermining the reputable science, sowing doubt and confusion among the public, and deploying an unprecedented army of lobbyists to derail climate change legislation.

As a result, we are making ourselves captives to a future that is likely to have catastrophic consequences on us and the rest of the people in the state of Maryland, on our nation, and particularly on the people in the impoverished countries and the next generations.

However, there are many signs of hope. God's grace is slowly opening our eyes. More and more people of faith come to realize that the responsibility to advocate for the wellbeing of God's creation should not be delegated exclusively to the environmentalists.

It is a moral and spiritual issue that should concern us as the Church. And it's not something peripheral but central to the Church's mission – a mission given by the One whom the Bible calls “the Bread of Life.” What is at stake? According to Pope Benedict XVI - and many reputable scientists - it is the survival of our human race.

“We all see that today man can destroy the foundation of his existence, his Earth... We cannot simply do what we want with this Earth of ours, with what has been entrusted to us... This obedience to the voice of the Earth is more important for our future happiness ... than the desires of the moment. Our Earth is talking to us and we must listen to it and decipher its message if we want to survive”.

Pope Benedict XVI, speaking to a group of 400 priests in northern Italy in the summer of 2007.

Informed by this sentiment, I invited Tom Carlson – Maryland Campaign Director of the CCAN – to give you an opportunity to learn about an exciting and very promising effort aimed at creating a path toward a more sustainable future through offshore wind power.

The wind power could supply the equivalent of 2/3 of our state's electricity needs, reduce our greenhouse gas emission, improve the health of our children, create jobs, and help nudge our nation into a more sustainable future.

Tom will give 10 minute long presentation with a few minutes for Q&A in the friary's basement right after the 10:30 AM Mass. I hope that many of you will consider taking advantage of this opportunity.

Learning about the environmental issue and connecting them to our faith is very important. But we should not forget that it should also lead us to act more decisively to care for God's creation in a way that impacts our lives and plunges us into a deeper, Christian conversion.

In my personal life, I recycle, I try to conserve energy and limit consumption, I compost, and preach and teach about the need to care for God's creation. Still, as I reflected and prayed over it, I felt that there was much more than I could do – especially as a Franciscan – a follower of the Patron Saint of ecology.

And so, nudged by the Holy Spirit, I've made a decision:

On Saturday, January 22, I will be participating in the Polar Bear Plunge.

That means I'll be joining a few hundred people and jumping into the Potomac River in National Harbor just a few miles from the political center of our nation.

I'll be doing this plunge for two reasons – and, let me make it clear, it's not because I like to swim in a freezing water. First of all, I'll be participating in the Polar Bear Plunge to call people's attention to the moral and spiritual dimension of global climate change, echoing the outmost seriousness and urgency with which the vast majority of the reputable scientists, the last two Popes, the bishops, and my Franciscan Order speak about this issue.

The second reason for my Polar Bear Plunge is that I want to help raise funds for CCAN and their critical campaign to mobilize people at the grassroots and empower them with a new vision and knowledge to support the alternative, clean-energy future in our state.

I hope that many of you would be joining me. However, if you are not able, please know that you can dispense from it and still sponsor me and support the cause.

On our parish's website you can find a link to a special page where you can read more about it and make a financial contribution in an easy and quick way. In advance, thank you for your support. Allow me to end this homily with a verse from a song written by an Anglican priest and social justice activist Garth Hewitt.

“Baptism for the journey, preparation for life... The journey before us may be rocky, it may be steep, but there is love all around us – a love that is so deep.”

May this feast of the Baptism of the Lord plunge us into the mystery of our own baptism and empower us to act on it so that God's creation can flourish and, as St. Paul says, “God be all in

all”. 1 Corinthian 15:28