

EXPLORING OUR FAITH

A Walk Through the Sunday Service Session 4 – The Baptismal Orientation of Our Worship

This is an installment in a series, adapted from notes in the Sunday bulletins at St. Andrew's, that is exploring our Sunday worship. What we do. How and why we do it. History, theology, the way worship connects us with the mystery of God in Jesus Christ. Questions and comments are welcome.

The worship environment. In our last session, we talked about how our worship environment at St. Andrew's (meaning the space in which we gather each Sunday) has evolved over the almost two hundred years our building has stood at the center of Hopkinton village. Starting from a plain Reformation Protestant interior, we saw how in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it gained adornments from Anglicanism's medieval Catholic heritage: stained glass windows; a reredos or retable behind the Altar, with a colored bas relief depicting St. John's account of the Resurrection; a little cabinet called a Tabernacle or Ambry for the reserved Sacrament, and a larger Altar raised on a series of steps. These changes also included the ornate silver Sanctuary Lamp hanging above the chancel area which burns to signify the presence of the Sacrament. We ended noting a change 40 years or so ago reflecting the theology introduced with the 1979 Book of Common Prayer: moving the Altar out from the wall a bit so the priest could preside facing the congregation. So a series of changes within a shell of reassuring continuity.

How many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb? So begins the joke. The punch line is: two; one to change the bulb and one to say they liked the old bulb better. Yes, we are a conservative tradition! Approval of the 1979 BCP took over 25 years of intensive study and discussion, and reflected another 50 years of scholarship before the formal revision process began. What changed with the 1979 Book was not just a book, but a whole understanding of who we are called to be as the Church. Things that seem familiar and beloved today (all of those listed above) were resisted as disturbing novelties when they were first suggested.

A baptismal orientation. The new orientation embodied in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer was actually ancient, rooted in Scripture and the early centuries of Christianity. It centers on the primacy of Baptism, with the People of God as the celebrants of the liturgy, not just the ordained. That is why our Sunday bulletin refers to the priest as "presider" rather than the former "celebrant." In worship space terms, this baptismal emphasis has favored flexible seating where people feel a sense of being one body rather than separate individuals; where they can move about easily rather than being confined to a seat; where they are not sharply separated from liturgical leaders. The 1979 changes called for the baptismal Font, as the liturgical locus of the rite of Holy Baptism, to be in a prominent location with ample room around it for the community to gather. Rather than being covered except for baptisms, it was to be kept open with ample water as a reminder to worshipers that their weekly gathering was nourishment for a lifelong journey begun at the Font. Baptisms were to be public celebrations, at the principal Eucharist on Sundays and particularly those with baptismal significance: the Easter Vigil, Pentecost, All Saints' Day and the Baptism of Our Lord in Epiphany. We can see that our own space embodies some of these goals, and diverges from others. Proposed changes in the chancel area will

help us bring our worship into closer harmony with the theology set forth in the Prayer Book. The real test will be whether they bring us closer to union with Christ.

A personal reorientation. As we reflect on our own experience of change in worship – whether we loved or hated innovations – it is helpful to pause and look inward at ourselves, not just outward at the changes. In a worship service where someone ordained “puts on the show” and we are a largely passive audience, we stand apart. We may say to the priest at the church door after the service, “I liked your message,” but it remains the preacher’s message – the priest’s service. To be a participant, a *celebrant*, is to place ourselves in the center of the action in a liturgy. It is to risk opening ourselves to the action of the Holy Spirit. For it is the Spirit that animates worship, drawing us in and changing us: incorporating us in the Body of Christ. No wonder this can take some getting used to! Asking ourselves not what we like or dislike, but what in a liturgy moves us closer to Christ and what keeps us as mere spectators – this may be helpful as we react to changes in worship.