

Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany, January 31, 2010, Year C

St. Bartholomew's Anglican Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Associate Rector

Scripture: Joel 2:1-32

“Christian Youth – A Promising Future”

The Prophet Joel proclaimed God's message to the people *“Blow a trumpet in Zion, Consecrate a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly, Gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children and the nursing infants. Let the bridegroom come out of his room and the bride out of her bridal chamber.”* (Joel 2:15-16) He continues with God's message: *“I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind; and your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on the male and female servants I will pour out My Spirit in those days. I will display wonders in the sky and on the earth, blood, fire and columns of smoke. The sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And it will come about that whoever calls on the name of the LORD will be delivered.”* (Joel 2:28-32) Please let me repeat that last part – *“whoever calls on the name of the LORD will be delivered.”* That alone is a most powerful message; – one filled with hope and promise for salvation.

This past December 27 through 30, Marilyn and I had the unique opportunity to witness and experience Christian Youth in action. We were surrounded by them – willingly captive with them at the Niagara Falls Convention Center. These four days – known as Joshua Revolution, would be eye opening and faith filled! We joined St. Bart's Youth – and as “drivers” to the hotel, across the street from the Convention Center, and staying there with the youth – we got a “bird's eye view” of what goes on when our youth go away. We were not disappointed – to be sure! Just as important – we got to see the inner workings of our Youth Program, and the outstanding job that Deacon Reitz, assisted by Tracey Callari, does in shepherding the youth. It was a powerful four days – with many lessons learned.

We expected to be volunteers for Joshua Revolution – simply praying for the youth and the speakers, but God had another idea. On Sunday afternoon – we were directed to the Prayer Team – but then into the room with a meeting for the Altar Workers. We figured – that's Ok – since Marilyn has been on Altar Guilds in churches we have attended, and I am familiar with altars. It wasn't that kind of task – it was praying with people any time an “altar call” was given at the end of the session. When youth and adults would come forward to make a commitment to Christ, recommit themselves, seek healing, or an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. We were expecting to work a few sessions and relax the rest of the time – listening to speakers – after all I was on vacation! God again had another idea. We had to attend meetings, get to sessions early, stay late; but the experiences that God gave us, and the people we got to meet, more than took care of that. All I can say is - WOW!

The four days were filled with a lot of music, laughter, tears, joy, some pain, healings, fear, and many young people experiencing the Holy Spirit and the Body of Christ in their lives for the first time. I look back on these four days and am grateful for the opportunity to be one of God's vessels during this powerful time in many lives. I want to share some of what happened.

There were kids everywhere! They had taken over the hotel and the convention center – and this was a VERY good thing. As a matter of fact – the youth had taken over about 5 or six hotels in the surrounding area – and their behavior was incredible! Let me share with you some of what I saw in St. Bart's Youth – as they converged on Deacon Reitz' room – for meals, for snacks, for prayer. When a few of the group took ill – the reaction was PRAYER. Watching these young people relying on the Creator and Healer – was very powerful. They didn't have to be told

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– they just went into action. Of course, Deacon Reitz and Tracey helped to guide and focus the prayer – but you could find our youth gathered in groups in the hallway of our hotel – praying for those who had been taken for medical care. This was VERY inspiring and comforting – to see our youth responding with such care, mercy and love for one another.

Another blessing was to see the way they responded to each of the speakers. They brought their Bibles, they brought journals - taking notes, and then preparing to “unpack” what they learned, later in discussions with the rest of the group. God was at the center of their 4 days – and they couldn’t get enough!

Joshua Revolution, whose theme this year was based on the Prophet Joel - challenged all those who attended – by providing excellent speakers and worship leaders, who spoke to everyone’s hearts – with an urgent message – that God loves you – and never wants to be apart from you! EVER! One speaker in particular brought a message that shook many - right where they sat. Bill Wiese, author of the incredible book called “23 Minutes in Hell” addressed everyone explaining an experience that the Lord took him through – a journey to Hell. He explained that for 23 minutes, he was separated from his body and sent to the pits of hell. He explained that he was rescued by Jesus – so that he might warn others that Hell is indeed real – and that MANY are destined to go there – too many. God does not want this – but there are people who don’t want God, or think that they don’t need Jesus, or make the mistake that there are other ways to heaven –thinking that they will get there just by being a good person. His message was quite unsettling for many in attendance – as was evidenced by the sheer numbers of people who came forward for prayer after the talk. It seemed like the line would not end. Many were terrified, but wanted to seek Jesus, because He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. I cannot share with you some of what was prayed – but I can tell you that God put it on my heart to remind these young men and women, and there were even youth leaders who came forward, that if you know Jesus – as Lord of your life, and you repent (turn away from) your sins – then you have NOTHING to FEAR! The Lord put on my heart to share with them Romans 6:23 “*For the wages of sin is death, BUT the gift of God is ETERNAL LIFE in Christ Jesus, Our Lord!*” We deserve hell – but because of Jesus and what He did on the cross – His righteousness is all God sees when we are judged. When we met for the “midnight snack” back at “Chez Reitz” I wanted to make sure that everyone was Ok – after this scary talk. Before they began their discussions – I reminded them of Christ’s love for them and left them with a special blessing for a restful night’s sleep in the Lord. I learned later from Deacon Reitz that they had some wonderful discussion – certain of their salvation! Thanks be to God.

There were many special speakers who had a real impact: Reggie Dabbs, a favorite from (KB) Kingdom Bound reminded us that you can’t change your past – but you can change your future; Michelle Lenz – who spoke to the girls and women about protecting your heart and walking in purity; Pastor Steve Gonzales – a survivor of gang life – reminded the young men about integrity and purity – but most of all that they should be living with respect for all women! He even challenged them to not let one female open her own door – all day. It was something to see! These messages really hit home for these young people, and their prayers and discussions spoke volumes to me and to one another.

Pastor Wally Magdangal who had been tortured and persecuted in Saudi Arabia, for starting underground home churches in Riyadh – spoke of his captivity, and his time on “death row.” He shared the pain and torture inflicted on him by his captives – supposed people of peace! They tried everything to get him to renounce Jesus – but he would not budge. He had been beaten so

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badly at one point that his own young daughter did not believe that he was her daddy. He reminded us of the Apostle Paul's words from 1 Corinthians 12:26 "*And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it.*" He became everyone's new hero – and remains that way today – for his courage and his faith. His story needs to be heard, especially in light of the fact that he was miraculously released – and freed, coming to the USA, so that he could share the truth about Islam and their torture of Christians. (How very timely, in light of our program today at 4PM for the Persecuted Church.) Ask one of St. Bart's youth who attended JR and they will excitedly tell you about Pastor Wally! His web site is <http://www.christiansincrisis.net/>

During the breakout sessions, a woman named Marlene Klepees spoke about how God changed her life – having been born with Cerebral Palsy, barely able to speak clearly, very poor vision – aided by very thick eyeglasses, unable to walk without the aid of crutches and braces on her legs – spending most of her day wheelchair bound – until God gave her a vision that she would be healed. God told her the date of her healing and she held out hope for that day. When that day came she was indeed completely and totally healed – able to run, to speak very clearly – and she does not use glasses! Marilyn and I were blessed to meet her late Tuesday evening after the altar call that had been for healing and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We were getting ready to leave and return to the hotel, when Nate, the leader of the Altar Workers came running over to me, excitedly telling me that Marlene was asking to see me by name. We went over to where she was and she grabbed my hand and told me that the trouble I was having with my right knee was not like my left – which required replacement – and that God told her to tell me that it was swelling and fluid that needed time to reduce. She prayed for me – and I thanked her – but she insisted that there was more – that I was struggling sleeping because I could not get comfortable due to the leg pain – and so she prayed for that – and I must say I had a wonderful night's sleep that night! The next morning we met her on the elevator and she asked me how I was doing and I told her – and she said she already knew. We walked over to the convention center with her – talking and praising God.

The faith that was present during this Joshua Revolution was incredible – and you could feel it, you could see it, you witnessed God working in it. The times of praise and worship were extraordinary – and the witness of the youth was like nothing I had EVER witnessed before. When Jesus visited His hometown of Nazareth – He did not perform miracles – not because He couldn't but because of the disbelief and lack of faith present in that town. Jesus was performing miracles at Joshua Revolution – a blind woman who had sung a song on stage the night before was given some of her sight back. I was told by one of our youth that a young man, the son of Mike Chorey – the leader of Joshua Revolution, who was wheel chair bound – was actually able to stand! All as result of powerful prayer by the young people present. A young man named Charley who had badly injured his knee came up for prayer – and it was terribly swollen and you could actually feel bumps in the knee – it was ugly to say the least. As we prayed it started to decrease in size and get smoother – and he asked me "what are you doing?" I told him it wasn't me but his faith in the power of God that was healing him. The next morning I saw him and he said that he was healed – I even saw him dancing to the music of the praise band! Awesome faith indeed!

These miraculous events took place because of the remarkable faith that was evident in the people who were taking part in Joshua Revolution. It goes beyond this – when Christian youth spend time together, sharing God's Word with each other, singing Christian songs, enjoying time of fellowship – then God is glorified – and He rewards those efforts with awesome blessings. We have witnessed the simplicity of their prayers, their genuine hearts that care for

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others and their combined efforts in activities that benefit others, raising money for water purification in Kenya; longing to go to the Dominican Republic to be Christ's hands and feet on a Mission Trip. God is using Christian Youth in a mighty way! You can be proud of St. Bart's Youth Group, their leaders, and all of the activities that they have planned. Keep them in your prayers, keep lifting them up before Almighty God, that they would continue to be strong, and continue to be obedient to God's Will in their lives.

I want to heartily thank the parents who send their sons and daughters to be a part of our Christian youth program, and suggest to the parents who are not sending their children to either Junior or Senior Youth Group – that they are missing something very worthwhile that is character building, and even more important steeped in the faith of Jesus Christ as Lord. Remember the Wisdom of Solomon – given to him by Almighty God that he wrote for us in Proverbs 22:6 "*Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it.*"

Our Christian Youth are precious, and they have a promising future!