



Jesus Hacked: Storytelling Faith

a weekly podcast from the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri
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Episode 101: Why Baptism Matters

We're starting our second season of JesusHacked with a focus on the Sacrament of Baptism. And how better to kick off an exploration of this topic than a conversation with our Bishop Wayne Smith and podcast host the Rev. Dan Handschy, who is the current head of the bishop's appointed task force on baptism.

Dan Handschy: My name is Dan Handschy, I am rector of Church of the Advent, have been for 25 years. I am also at this moment the chair of the baptism task force that the bishop put together at the last convention, and so I am here interviewing Bishop Smith about baptism and ecclesiology and Christendom and some other really big words.

Dan Handschy: Bishop, welcome.

Bishop Smith: Thank you very much.

Dan Handschy: In your address at convention, you contrasted Christendom with baptismal ecclesiology, and those are some 50 cent words-

Bishop Smith: Well yes, they are.

Dan Handschy: I wonder if we might unpack them a little bit and give them some content and some context. Christendom has always meant that not so

easy alliance between church and culture from Constantine until just recently, can you describe how the last gasps of Christendom affect us in the Diocese of Missouri?

Bishop Smith: Well, they affect us rather directly, I think. Christendom allows the church to rely upon the structures of the culture around it, and sometimes the culture and the practices of the church appear inseparable, so as those structures begin to deteriorate so will some of the superficial strength of the church. And I say superficial because the true strength of the church comes not from its reliance upon the culture, but upon its reliance on the Spirit, and I think that one of the good pieces of good news about the demise of Christendom is that it will force us more rigorously to rely on spiritual practices.

Dan Handschy: Can you name some of those structures on which the church has relied recently, those cultural structures?

Bishop Smith: The presumption that North American culture is Christian culture or maybe in its more expansive expression Judaeo-Christian. I think that that's simply fading away, I think that the cultural expectation that someone go to church in order to succeed in a community is pretty much gone now. I actually take that as a good thing, not a bad thing, because it means that most of the people who are in church on Sunday actually want to be there or perhaps even dare I say imagine themselves to be called to the place.

Dan Handschy: Okay. What does it mean ... Then what changes in how congregations operate if we begin to assume that people who are in church are called to be there by God?

Bishop Smith: Let me say this first, Dan, that there will be effects of demise of Christendom that will cause panic in many of our congregations because they will see a diminution in the number of people in worship and along with that they may see some financial pressures, and so whatever it is that we do on the other side is going to require us to take that into account.

Dan Handschy: How might congregations ... What change in thought and practice might come into a congregation if we begin to think of the people who are there as being called there by God?

Bishop Smith: I think one thing is calls us back to basics, and make no assumptions about what the people of God in any given place might know, so I think it forces us back on being more attentive to the scriptural witness and taking the responsibility for learning that ourselves. I think that it must make us more reliant on spiritual practices, both personal practices and communal practices.

Christendom I think has sort of celebrated the rock solid individual and this business of a different way of being Christian really understands we can't do this by ourselves, that we require a community in order for it to happen.

Dan Handschy: So let's look at that contrast between individual and community, much of American Christianity focuses on my getting in heaven, right? My personal relationship with Jesus. My getting into heaven. Churches have tended to preach revivals to attract people to ... You want to avoid hell, that kind of thing. What would the focus on that communal aspect, what would that change in our thinking about Christianity?

Bishop Smith: I think one of Paul's points in Romans 8, which is becoming one of my favorite stretches of scripture, is that he addresses a universe that is yearning for salvation, that which God is saving is much larger than we ordinarily imagine, and I take that to a next step and want to say that we are either being saved all together including with this cosmic community or else we're not being saved at all, which is to say that my salvation in ways that I might like or might not like depends upon you and all the others.

Dan Handschy: In most of our congregations I think would find it rather surprising to think that their worship together somehow engaged the salvation of cosmos, that's carried forward the salvation of the cosmos, how do we educate ourselves about that?

Bishop Smith: If we can free our theological imagination I think that we will come closer to doing that. It being a cosmos, which God has had work, saving through Christ Jesus, then the microcosm exists in the gathered community at the Eucharist every Sunday.

Dan Handschy: Peter says in his letter, which I think reads like the ... First letter reads kind of like a sermon in a baptism ...

Bishop Smith: It does.

Dan Handschy: That we are called as a royal priesthood, and so I've always taken that to mean that we the church are offering in our eucharistic worship a sacrifice to God, which then carries the creative order to the divine life. How might we think about ... How might congregations think about what they're offering in ways that would help expand our theological imagination?

Bishop Smith: Well, first of all, I think that it's good really to emphasize this piece that we often understand as a reformation gem, it's actually one of the jewels from scriptural heritage and from the writings of the ancient Christian. Aidan Kavanagh a great liturgical scholar who is himself called

the Glory used to say that we were baptized for priesthood, ordained to presbyterate.

Dan Handschy: Yeah.

Bishop Smith: And I think that if we could help people understand that they play a particular role in the Sunday Eucharist that no one else can take on, that their priesthood is not just nice, not just important, but really crucial to the whole Eucharistic life of that community, that maybe it is they come to the Eucharist with a particular prayer that they need to offer. Notice, not put on the prayer list ...

Dan Handschy: Right.

Bishop Smith: But a certain prayer that they need to be present to offer. Or some brokenness that they are aware of in their own life, perhaps, or in the world around them, some systemic failing, like racism in all of its particular expressions, perhaps it's crucial that they show up to bring that yearning, that brokenness, that need to the offering of the Eucharist.

Dan Handschy: You're starting to sound like my Nazarene pastors of ages past that we need that opportunity within the liturgy for ... We used to call it testimony or witness, right? That I bring my concerns, but they have to be shared. I can't just do that privately, so it sounds like you're talking about we need to take a little more time, a little more attention in our Eucharistic worship.

Bishop Smith: We either need to do that, and I'm fine with that sort of structure by the way, or else we need to do something in parallel with the liturgy, perhaps-

Dan Handschy: Gotcha.

Bishop Smith: In which we reflect upon and expand upon what it is that we've been about in the Eucharistic worship.

Dan Handschy: And so that the sermon might bring in that preparation, the prayers of the people would clearly reflect that.

Bishop Smith: Right.

Dan Handschy: So in that passage in Peter where we're made a royal priesthood, I think part of the difficulty with the way the reformation handled that, is that at least sort of the radical end of the reformation, assumed that each of us was a priest on our own ...

Bishop Smith: Right.

Dan Handschy: As a go-between between us and God, and I think what Peter means is that as a community we have a collective priesthood. What is it that we as the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Missouri need to be offering to God in our Eucharistic worship? You kind of hit some of those notes; racism, perhaps, what are some other things that you see from your perspective that as the priesthood of Christ in this Church in this place we need to be offering?

Bishop Smith: Well, I probably could say racism, racism, racism, because our community is just broken open with our racist past and present. I think that some of the other divides among us are places where we have been broken. The disconnect between urban and not urban, although as bishop I've been privileged over these past 16 years really to recognize that all of our geographies have more in common than not. I will say that I have seen urban poverty and I have seen rural poverty and they look an awful lot alike.

Dan Handschy: Mm-hmm (affirmative). The other word that ... And we've sort of unpacked it, the other word from your address that I wanted to unpack was baptismal ecclesiology. Ecclesiology is just a word that means a way of thinking about the church. And so thinking about the church ecclesologically and baptismally rather than culturally, those are some of the shifts that we're focusing on. Anything else you want to add to that? Anything else that you want to say about baptismal ecclesiology?

Bishop Smith: I think that the Episcopal Church by historical accident has preserved a great gift, and that is the historical episcopate. We are one of just a handful of churches of the reformation who managed to do that. Sometimes we have confused this accidental gift for being the essence of the Church itself, the Church in my estimation, and I say this being a bishop and number 975 in the American succession, you can trace my Episcopal genealogy all the way back to Samuel Seabury and to those Scotts Episcopalians who made him a bishop, sometimes we make more out of that than the profound act of baptism. I think that we have to come to terms with what makes the church, is it the episcopate, is it the historic episcopate, or is it the rather more crucial act of baptism, more profound act of baptism.

Dan Handschy: Right, you've left off preaching and taking up meddling.*

Bishop Smith: Thank you very much.

Dan Handschy: How might we do that? How might we focus attention back on baptism?

Bishop Smith: My sense is that whatever a local community can do to draw attention to the importance of baptism, even in small steps that's a good

thing, so for some places it means just having baptisms at the main celebration of the year on a Sunday. If that's a step, take it. For others, it will mean greater focus on the baptismal feast listed in our prayerbook, the Great Vigil of Easter being the greatest one of all, the feast of Pentecost, the Sunday after the Epiphany, which is kept as the baptism of Christ, and All Saints Day or the Sunday after All Saints Day. There's a fifth occasion that is not a set day and that's the visitation of the bishop who exists in the diocese as the chief minister of baptism.

Dan Handschy: I've heard particularly priestly organizations where we all come lay hands on the ordinand described as a rugby scrum.

Bishop Smith: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yep.

Dan Handschy: And so we focus a lot of attention on that, we do it to sort of at the diocesan level. You're suggesting enriching as far as possible the ritual around baptism and letting that do the teaching, is there other kinds of teaching that we need to be doing, and what might that ... What shape might that take?

Bishop Smith: Let me go back to the ritual practices. Baptism (Greek pronunciation) means literally being drowned, it's the same verb in Greek that is used to describe a sinking ship ...

Dan Handschy: Oh my goodness.

Bishop Smith: So there ... Our practice allows the infusion of water, but for goodness sake if we're going to pour water over let's make sure someone gets really wet. Our prayerbook has always listed immersion as the preferred ritual action, but let's get wet at least, at least that much, and if we use oils let's not use a little dab will do ya-

Dan Handschy: Smear them up.

Bishop Smith: Smear ... Make it an actual anointing as of the priest and royal persons of Israel's past. There's a piece of ritual practice, going along with that is catechesis, of course, we tend in the American setting, to look at catechesis as preparation for something to happen then it's over and done with and you fold that tent up and get on to the next thing. Ancient catechetical method was similar to that, but with a notable difference, it looked to the experience first and then you would reflect upon the experience.

Dan Handschy: Interpret it..

Bishop Smith: Right. Right. For example, when we had the catechumenate in the parish I served in Des Moines for many years, part of the ritual involved

the people in the process would wash feet on Maundy Thursday, and beforehand the leaders of the group would explain to them how to wash feet. Then afterwards they would reflect on that experience having washed feet and then search the scriptures to help them understand it more fully.

Dan Handschy: So it's this kind of constant circling back experience, interpretation, experience, interpretation-

Bishop Smith: Yes. Right. Which is never done.

Dan Handschy: Right. Right. We do some catechesis beforehand when they come to have the baby done, and then they pretty much disappear from the scene, and so we need to find ways of keeping them to interpret what has happened.

Bishop Smith: Right. I am so aware that God is not yet finished with my own catechesis.

Dan Handschy: So that leads me to my next question, you were raised in the Southern Baptist tradition, which I'm going to assume means that you were old enough to want your first baptism and remember it ...

Bishop Smith: Yes.

Dan Handschy: How old were you and ...

Bishop Smith: I was nine years old.

Dan Handschy: Can you describe the experience?

Bishop Smith: It's vividly imprinted in my memory. I accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior, in a spring revival at the First Baptist Church in Tuscola, Texas. The following Sunday I was baptized in the baptistry in that little church. I remember walking down the steps into the water, I remember holding onto the pastor's arm as he instructed me to do, and I remember the words, "George Wayne Smith because you are acting in obedience to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And I was pushed under the water. Remember it vividly. But indoor baptisms were ... That was kind of a new-fangled thing in that community, most of the people, certainly in my parents' generation and even a little bit younger, were baptized in the pitiful little creek that ran through our community.

Dan Handschy: What changed in your life, I mean, from this perspective looking back, what was the shift that happened there?

Bishop Smith: In my baptism?

Dan Handschy: Yes. How did your life change from that moment forward?

Bishop Smith: Well, I think God had always had a claim on my life, that was clear to me, and I've said in many settings that the old women who taught Sunday school in south Taylor County, Texas, have as much as anyone has to do with my being a bishop today because they taught me that God had a purpose for me. And they hinted at what that purpose might be and I didn't like what they were hinting at.

Dan Handschy: Preacher.

Bishop Smith: Well yes, or missionary, those were two good things to be. We were blessed in those communities, we had missionaries who had gone off and come back home. They are probably the most dangerous people in the Southern Baptist churches because they see what God is doing in the wider cosmos and they come back and they tell those stories. And it's disruptive to a lot of the narrative that becomes commonplace in evangelical circles.

Bishop Smith: Anyway, I knew that my baptism was a seal on whatever it was that God was going to ask from me for the rest of my life, and so that is the crucial moment for me, the baptism.

Dan Handschy: In the more protestant traditions baptism is seen as ... As you say, a seal of a decision already made.

Bishop Smith: Right.

Dan Handschy: In the Catholic traditions, in the Episcopal Church, it's seen as the regeneration ...

Bishop Smith: Yes.

Dan Handschy: The gift of God, so do you think that as you've moved on from nine years old that you've come to see that as a regenerative moment rather than as sealing something-

Bishop Smith: Oh, of course. Of course. Regeneration was happening to me. I have come to believe the baptism accomplishes something.

Dan Handschy: Yes.

Bishop Smith: That regeneration is in baptism, the counterpart of what real presence is in the Eucharist.

Dan Handschy: It's a real thing, it's there.

Bishop Smith: Right. Right.

Dan Handschy: I've heard you say in other contexts, and I can't remember where I heard you say it, that you understand your successive ordinations as if not a diminishment of ministry at least a narrowing of focus. Say more about that, what have you given up in your ordinations?

Bishop Smith: Along the way at every step I have given up paradoxical freedom and I've become ... I give over more authority to someone else. And I try to talk with people who are asking me about ordination to the diaconate or to the priesthood, I ask them to imagine what it is they might be giving up and allowing me and a bunch of other people to lay hands on them. Those of us who are ordained live under authority, and I do it every day in my life, I find that paradoxical piece that we read about in Scripture and pray in one of our best Collects that the service of God is in fact perfect freedom, so living under authority paradoxically for me has a way of being a freeing piece. But make no bones about it, I am less free in many, many ways as a bishop than I ever was as just a member of the baptized.

Dan Handschy: Fill that in with some content. Say what those structures of authority look like, what the freedoms ...

Bishop Smith: Well, let me just give one example from the time that I was a priest. If I attended a Roman Catholic Eucharist, say at a funeral or a wedding of a parishioner, generally what I would do ... Would be to follow the lead of the non-Roman Catholic family. If they received communion, I received communion. I can't do that now because of my identity as a bishop. It could cause scandal. It could cause difficulties in our ecumenical relationship with the Roman Catholic church, so that's not available to me in the way that it was before.

Bishop Smith: Another thing that I'm keenly aware of is that some of the ministries that I've found life giving during the time that I was a parish priest are not available to me now.

Dan Handschy: For instance.

Bishop Smith: For instance, spiritual direction, I engaged in a lot of spiritual direction when I was a parish priest, and I saw a lot of clergy in spiritual direction. Well, in my dual relationship as a person's bishop it would not be appropriate also for me to be that person's spiritual director.

Dan Handschy: What kinds of ministries are available to the baptized that are not available to the ordained?

Bishop Smith: Almost everything.

Dan Handschy: Say more, fill that in.

Bishop Smith: People will say ... And I think rightly so, so what is it that you might be able to do as a deacon that you can't do as a lay person? Good question, the answer is not much. Can read the Gospel, set the table, and give the dismissal, that's pretty much it. Then you have to extend that same question to the presbyterate [priests] and to the episcopate [bishops], what is it that you could do as a priest that you can't do as a lay person? Same answer, not much. You can do those things that a deacon would do if the deacon is not present, plus preside at the table, preside at baptism when the bishop is not present, declare blessing and absolution--that is it. That is it. And a bishop can do all those things named above plus ordain and confirm. Those are very discreet actions that are available to the ordained, and I would say that every other aspect of the Christian life is available to the baptized.

Dan Handschy: Right. We tend to think of the ordained as taking on ministries, taking on authority, backing up a little earlier in the conversation there might be several people surprised to hear you say that as a bishop you live under authority, thinking that, gosh, you've got it all ... And so that's kind of a surprise. If we're thinking of the church in terms of baptism, if we're thinking of the church as a royal priesthood, you know, community ... communal identity, what then ... And you've kind of listed that, but let's go a little more theological, What is the role of the ordained within that ecclesiology? What is the role of the ordained within an understanding of the church as the community of the baptized?

Bishop Smith: I think the purpose of Holy Orders lies in the name. We provide order, that is our most important function, so a presbyter presides at the Eucharist, that everyone present might in an orderly fashion join in the Eucharistic feast and all of its actions, which will include a sacrifice and an offering. Bishop, bishop provides order more than perhaps anything else, so I live under the authority of Constitution and Canons of the episcopal church as well as to the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament which we all sign.

Dan Handschy: Yes. Yes.

Bishop Smith: And my job really is to see that those things happen and that they do so in an orderly fashion. I also have responsibilities for overseeing the ministries, both lay and ordained in the life of this diocese. I find great purpose and joy in being allowed to do that.

Dan Handschy: Recently at the consecration of Saint Francis in Eureka, I love that service of the consecration of the new building. There are several things I love about it, one is that the rector has almost no part ...

Bishop Smith: Right.

Dan Handschy: Right, the rector says this prayer about hoping that we can come to see God in those moments, those sacramental moments in our life together, and so I see the role of the presbyter as calling attention to bringing into our attention those moments where God is revealed.

Bishop Smith: Right.

Dan Handschy: The bishop consecrates the altar so that the bishop is the person who says, "Yes, there is a baptismal community gathered here that needs an altar."

Bishop Smith: Yes.

Dan Handschy: But really what you're doing is just saying, "This community is now self-sustaining and this altar is in communion with all of the other altars in the diocese."

Dan Handschy: Last question, and I hope to get you to kind of think forward. In your convention address you said that you were going to devote whatever remained of your episcopate, and now we know what that is, to this re-enriching of our understanding of baptism. If you had your way, if that went well, how would the diocese, how would the life of the congregations in this diocese, feel different in April 2020 from now?

Bishop Smith: I've actually given some thought to that. I think that we would become more serious about catechesis and that sort of ongoing life-long and life-giving manner that I described earlier. I also thought more seriously ... In the past we've had big events here at Christ Church Cathedral with Flower Sunday, lessons and carols and those sorts of things. I'd like to redirect that togetherness energy and see us come together for one spectacular diocesan Easter Vigil in which we made a point of saving up some baptisms and-

Dan Handschy: So doing congregational baptisms here at the cathedral.

Bishop Smith: Yes. Right. Right.

Bishop Smith: I'd like to put that as an invitation rather than this is the way it's going to-

Dan Handschy: Sure. Well, just like with confirmations.

Bishop Smith: Right. Right. I think that that would help us grow toward-

Dan Handschy: That could be ... Yeah.

Bishop Smith: A baptismal life that is ritually sumptuous.

Dan Handschy: Can you imagine 10 baptisms in one ... Yes, and parading them around.

Bishop Smith: Yeah. I can imagine that...

Dan Handschy: Right. To make it a big deal, to have a dinner ... Yeah, okay. Cool. Anything else? What else would feel different at the end of April 2020?

Bishop Smith: If we could lose some of the anxiety around the ordination process that would help. I would feel very good about that. I say this often and I'll say it here that ordination is just a matter of detail in the overarching baptismal life into which God calls us. But it's not the only detail and there are other details. Marriage, for example, or not, is a detail.

Dan Handschy: So might that shift of focus, that loss of anxiety, look like training congregations to call people forth ...

Bishop Smith: Yes.

Dan Handschy: Rather than a screening process.

Bishop Smith: Yes. In some ways I think that's what the old women who taught me Sunday school in south Taylor County, Texas, did. They saw something in me that I could not see in myself and didn't much like it, and they really sort of instinctively and intuitively ... But if we became intentional about doing that I think that would be a good thing.

Dan Handschy: We might have to imagine some training going on in the congregations, not just with discernment committees, but with whole congregations-

Bishop Smith: Correct.

Dan Handschy: Yeah. Okay. That would be an interesting project, an interesting-

Bishop Smith: And that probably won't come to fruition during-

Dan Handschy: But if you could get it started. Yes, you could get it started. Okay.

Dan Handschy: Now, you said that earlier on that God is not done with your catechesis, so here's my very last question. As you are looking at your

retirement and doing that reflection, that continuous reflection on your own baptism, what do you think God is bringing to birth in you at this moment in your life? Your baptism is bringing to birth...

Bishop Smith: There are two things happening almost simultaneously. One of them is that I know now far more clearly what I don't know than I did when I was a boy priest, for example. And also I'm eager both to learn and to write. I think that writing is one of the pieces of fruition that retirement may make available to me. That's just one possibility. I imagine other things also. I love the work of a bishop and the gifts that I have might be useful in some other setting, I'm open to that possibility.

Dan Handschy: And just letting God take the initiative.

Bishop Smith: That's right. I think that I'm ready for that to happen.

Dan Handschy: You need to find some lady Sunday school teachers-

Bishop Smith: That's right.

Dan Handschy: And let them say, "Here is where you're going." Okay, well thank you.

Bishop Smith: My pleasure.

*Editor's note: The oldest joke about preachers is that when they begin to deal with our true bad habits and sins in their sermons, we say that "they've gone from preaching to meddling."