Sometimes when working on a sermon I get stuck, realizing that there are things about the nature of God that I simply cannot explain, at least not in words and I am pretty sure that finger puppets would not help a lot either. This may be why sermons are so often about behavior — treat people with dignity, don’t covet your neighbors chickens, don’t defraud Medicaid using a string of shady dental clinics on the Mexican border. These are fairly easy and straightforward pronouncements to make, but things get difficult when one tries to explain what is at the center of Christianity, that is when we try to explain God. A few weeks back Bramwell did great work when he tackled the Trinity, but if you recall he included a lot of caveats about ways not to think about the Trinity. For the problem is that whenever we go too far in our descriptions they run into the same issue that Princess Leia identified when she warned Grand Larkin that, “The more you tighten your grip, the more star systems will slip through your fingers.” For the more we try to describe God the more illusive it seems to become. But today we have a baptism and we will welcome someone into Christ’s One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, so it might be worth taking just a minute and asking what exactly are we welcoming them into. That is what will we mean when in a few moments we say, “We receive you into the household of God. Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood.”

Well, I want to do this in an Episcopalian manner and not go rogue like Tom Cruise did in those movies where Tom Cruise went rogue (Top Gun, Mission Impossible, The Firm, A Few Good Men, Jerry McGuire, Born on the Fourth of July, well you get the point) . As a result this discussion will take place in the context of what we were given in the lectionary, and fortunately our reading from Colossians is something of Paul’s attempt to explain this “faith of Christ crucified.” He explains it this way, “Christ Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers-- all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

So let’s get started and use this scripture as a guide to explain what it is that we are welcoming Rose into. Paul starts this bit of scripture with what we might call the backstory. If he were Peter Parker this would be the radioactive spider bit, only in this case we are answering who Jesus is and where did he come from? As Christians we believe that Jesus is God or as Paul says “the image of the invisible God” and that he was “before all things” meaning that he has always existed. Paul continues with the backstory by explaining how Jesus as the preexistent God brought all things into being. That is everything that exists, exists because of Jesus. And leaving the backstory we as Christians believe that this preexistent God who created all things became man and dwelt among us. Meaning, Jesus was fully man and fully divine or using the words formulated at the Council of Chalcedon Jesus is “perfect both in deity and in humanness; this selfsame one is also actually God and actually man." But there is more.

In the next part of this passage from Colossians we get into what it is that we are welcoming the newly baptized into. God becoming man and dwelling among us is great and exciting and all that, but it does not change anything, it does not create a church. If Jesus had simply been born, looked around at the dogs breakfast that humanity had made of things and decided to leave because life was much better in the heavenly realm, nothing would have been different. But that is not what happened. If you don’t remember it from Easter Paul describes what Jesus did on earth as peace being made through the “blood of the cross.” This blood is mentioned as the main characteristic of the crucifixion probably because of the sacrificial system that existed in Judaism. Just for a quick review for those of you who have not sacrificed two turtledoves recently. In the sacrificial system sins were atoned for through the sacrifice of an animal. You sinned, you made a sacrifice and then you were restored to God’s good graces, at least temporarily. So if we view Christ’s death on the cross in the context of the sacrificial system, then it is through the blood that was spilled on the cross that there is peace between us and God. And Christ being the lamb without blemish was the perfect sacrifice and so it does not have to be done again, because, if you want to be all Hellenistic about it - it was the Platonic form of the sacrifice. Now if you like this understanding that’s great, if you don’t like it that is okay too. The thing that we do need to believe however is that somehow in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we have been made right with God and those who believe in him will not perish but have everlasting life. Today Rose is taking the first step in participating in the saving work that God has done through his son Jesus Christ. She is coming into this thing that was initiated by God in order to make us right with God.

Now I want to go slightly off script, even though I promised not to, and answer the question of why we are we baptized in the first place, because it is more than just welcoming someone to the party. The easy answer for why we do it is because Jesus told us to. At the end of Matthew’s Gospel Jesus says, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” But as good as that reason is Jesus does not ask us to do things just to see if we will do them. Baptism, like the Eucharist does something for us. God participates in the Eucharist and God participates in our baptism. The definition of a sacrament is “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.” Through our baptism we are given grace to be conformed to Christ. This is a step on our pathway to be God’s own. So how does this work? In the Nicene Creed we say, “We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.” Which doesn’t simply imply but rather explicitly states that baptism forgives sins. Which sins you may ask. Well there are various theories but let me give you St. Augustines interpretation. He argues that baptism cleanses us of original sin, that is the sin we inherited through Adam. Some people do not like this interpretation, but I think it makes a lot of sense. Our baptism restores us to the state that Adam and Eve were in before they sinned. That is what the church is supposed to be. It is a vessel through which we are in a restored state, a state where we have access to God in the same way that Adam and Eve did. When we welcome the newly baptized we are welcoming them to this state of grace, to this place where we have been restored, a place where we are no longer separated from God. This happens because God became man and dwelt among and died on the cross for our sins. And as a result we are Christ’s own both now and forevermore.