In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Like many of you, I have been looking forward to this particular Sunday for a long time. I have been eager for this day because this is the day of the baptism of the Stevenson children. What a wonderful way to end this year of our Lord 2018! Nadia is fourteen years old, John just turned thirteen this month, Nora is eleven, and Julian is five years old. Today is their birthday into Christ and into the Church. A year from now, and every year after that, they can re-light their baptism candles and have a bit of a celebration, because this is the day when our risen Lord Jesus Christ comes to them and pledges himself to them and they pledge themselves to him. Jesus comes to them alongside the Sea of Galilee, as it were, and calls out to them as he did to Peter and Andrew, James and John, long ago, “Come, children, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men and women, boys and girls. Come, Nadia, John, Nora, and Julian, follow me, and we are going to do some real good in this world!”

I have been preparing these children for baptism by going over the catechism with them. And they had been eager students. But today they get some more baptism instruction by way of a real master teacher. I mean St. Paul. The appointed Epistle reading for today happens to be a perfect reading for a baptism. The third chapter of Colossians is what is called “baptismal catechesis.” The apostle Paul is writing to new Christians in a small city called Colossae in Asia Minor or modern-day Turkey. The faith of the church back then was young. New Christians needed lots of help to understand what it means to be baptized and to belong to Jesus. In our particular passage the apostle talks about baptism by way of talking about clothing — about taking off old clothes and old ways and putting on new clothes and new ways. So, my sermon text for this morning is a baptism text from Colossians Chapter 3. I am going to read it aloud very soon, but before doing that, I want to point out that St. Paul speaks of his congregation using the words, “God’s chosen ones.” As I read our passage aloud, I want you children — Nadia, John, Nora, and Julian — I want you to take these words to heart and to realize that these words mean you! Indeed, these words, “God’s chosen ones” include all of you within the reach of my voice, if you are willing. You are all either baptized or hereby invited to be baptized, and so you are among God’s chosen ones, if you are willing. Our text, then, goes this way:

1 On principle, I do not care about who the historical/critical scholars say is the true author of Colossians. By tradition, Colossians is part of the Pauline corpus. That is good enough for me.
Put on then, *as God’s chosen ones*, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Colossians 3:12-14, RSV)

To begin thinking about this baptismal text, let us recall that this is Christmas week. We are in the early part of the twelve days of Christmas. We had a large and beautiful celebration on Christmas Eve, just a few days ago. It is interesting to me that year-by-year the lectionary for Christmas Eve always lifts up one passage in particular for the Second Lesson for that nighttime liturgy. It is a short passage from St. Paul’s letter to Titus. It is about Jesus born in Bethlehem. It is about our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. It speaks of the purpose of Jesus in coming into our world and dying for us. The passage goes this way:

He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. (Titus 2:14, NRSV)

Here we see that Jesus had something in mind in becoming incarnate of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He was after something. Actually, if we look closely at the full text, we see that Jesus was — and always is — after two things. He wants to save us and he wants to create a godly and holy people on earth. His first goal — salvation — appears in the first verse of our Christmas Eve reading:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all... (Titus 2:11, NRSV)

But as it turns out, this salvation means not only salvation from hell and damnation, but also salvation from sin. As the apostle puts it, Jesus has come that...

...he might redeem us *from all iniquity* and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. (Titus 2:14, NRSV)

---

2 I am grateful to Leonard Klein for lifting up this Titus passage in his discussion of Colossians 3 in the *Lectionary Commentary on the Second Readings*. 
When Jesus came down from heaven and was born of the Virgin Mary, he was not just whistling Dixie. He was intent on something. He was yearning for something. Imagine this: Jesus was, and always is, yearning for you and me, that we should lead godly lives and that we should be “zealous for good deeds.” Think of yourself and of your brothers and sisters in the Lord: Jesus wants you to live a godly life and to be zealous for good deeds. He wants you to be on the lookout for good deeds. He wants you to look for opportunities to do some good. He wants you to look around you for people in need, including people who need some help, encouragement, guidance and good advice. He wants you to be his godly and holy people on earth.

These baptisms we celebrate today — the baptisms of the Stevenson children — are meant to make things better on earth. Your baptism and my baptism, however long ago they were or however recent, our baptisms were meant to make this old earth a better place.

The great thing about today’s reading from Colossians 3 is that it specifies particular traits of character we should try to develop in ourselves. We should practice these good traits. Practice them, even if they feel odd or a bit foreign at first. Practice them, repeat them, praise them... until they begin to shape our souls.

In the verses just before our passage in Colossians 3, St. Paul speaks of the bad traits we should step away from, like laying aside old clothes. Here are the bad traits we should forsake, according to the Apostle Paul:

8But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. 9Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices 10and have clothed yourselves with the new self... (Colossians 3:8-10, NRSV)

These are the vices of life. These are the traits that cause misery on earth—anger, malice, lying to one another. These are the ways of life that are unworthy of Jesus and harmful to a world he loves.

Then St. Paul turns to the good traits of character we should work at developing in ourselves. Practice them, repeat them, praise them, and cultivate them in yourself, your children, your neighbors, everyone in sight. And so, St. Paul speaks of these things:

... compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, 13forbearing one another ... (Colossians 3:12-13, NRSV)

It is a great list of Christian virtues. When we are baptized Jesus hopes to be launching out into the world people of compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, patience...people who are willing to forbear and to forgive one
another. And then St. Paul summarizes it all with a wonderful exhortation. He wants us to adorn ourselves with a particular garment—the garment of love. His great words go this way:

14And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Colossians 3:14, NRSV)

I think that many of us have lived long enough that we have come to agree with St. Paul that there would be a lot more harmony on earth if we all would turn with strength to our baptismal goal to “put on love.”

I end by speaking briefly of our Gospel Lesson for this morning. This morning’s Gospel Lesson tells the story of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem—the way Jesus lingered behind in the temple talking with the priests and Bible scholars, so that his parents lost track of him for three days—days that must have been heartsick with fear. When they found him, they scolded him, and Jesus answered back, explaining to them that it was necessary for him to be about this heavenly Father’s business. So, young Jesus has an independent streak to him. But that Gospel passage ends by speaking of the obedience of Jesus to his parents and of his growth in size and in wisdom. These final words go this way:

51And he [Jesus] went down with them [Mary and Joseph] and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these things in her heart.
52And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man. (Luke 2:51-52, RSV)

So it should be with all of us children of God. Whether we are young or old, weak or strong, longtime Christians or recently baptized, we should try to increase in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and humanity. No matter how old we might be, there is more work to be done in the name of Jesus.

Nadia, John, Nora, and Julian: We live in a beautiful world. There is beauty in nature, and there is an awful lot of love around — love between parents and children, husbands and wives, friends and neighbors. I want you to increase the beauty and the love in this world. This is right for you children being baptized today. This is right for each of us, even if we are grey or white-haired and have lived with Christ for a long time now. Each morning, let us put on the garments of compassion, forbearance, forgiveness, and love and head out into the day, trying to let the world see in us something of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.