In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Good evening, my friends and colleagues. Welcome to the 232nd Annual Convention of the Diocese of Virginia! I am excited and full of joy to be standing here before you once again.

Much has happened since we last met – and, over the next little bit of time I hope to highlight at least some of the important things that we have experienced on our path together. I also hope that my words will help set the stage for this Convention, and for the days and weeks that follow.

Our Convention is an amazing event every year, but I am particularly proud of how things are coming together for this one. We have two fantastic keynote speakers – the Right Reverend Craig Loya, Bishop of Minnesota; and the Very Reverend Dr. Ian Markham, Dean and President of Virginia Theological Seminary and President of the General Theological Seminary. These two fine Christian souls have been in the thick of things for many years now, and I am looking forward to learning from their wisdom.

Committees of Convention have worked hard to make the legislation, worship, and logistics flow clearly and collegially, and for all of that I am deeply thankful. We have 611 people registered this year, up from 564 last year. We have increased the number of exhibitors in our ministry fair by half – we have 57 this year, up from 38 last year. Last year we had four youth delegates present – this year, we have *sixteen* youth delegates and two alternates.

We have made some programmatic and logistical changes this year. We are offering eighteen workshops tomorrow afternoon, up from sixteen last year; and we will host our Friday Evening Reception at the baseball park across the parking lot. Baseball season may be over, but a ballpark is magical no matter the time of year, right?

Further, in response to a consistent request in our post-Convention conversations the past few years, we are going to make a change to how we gather tomorrow morning. In past years, when we have met in this venue, this room has remained set up for the Friday morning session much as it is tonight – with chairs arranged theatre-style. We have had to do that because of architecture, time, and cost.

The architecture and time pieces really boil down to the fact that the airwalls have to be closed during our limited lunchtime to create the spaces we need for workshops. In addition, the amount of labor and other resources necessary to break down tables and properly set up the workshop spaces so quickly has been beyond our reach. This all means that we have found ourselves forced by logistics into a configuration that feels way too lecture-hall-esque, and not enough like the collegial community that we prefer.

That being said: This year we have worked with the Convention Center to get it figured out. Extra labor will be on site tomorrow so that we can have *tables in the morning*, and then the magic can be worked to swap it all out in time for the workshops. This is costing more, I want to be transparent about that – it is costing more because, as scripture reminds us, laborers are worthy of their wages – but we are trying to be responsive to the wants and needs of this body.

So, yes – I am confident that this is going to be a terrific Convention. It will be a place of deep connection, and a time of inspiration and faith development that will serve us well on our journey as a people who love Jesus, embody justice, and really dig into being disciples.

Before I move into other things, I want to take a moment and express some additional words of appreciation.

First, I am so very thankful to everyone who is here for this convention, lay and ordained. I offer a special thank you to those of you who have to take time off of work to be present. For many of our priests and bishops, these days are a part of what we get paid to do. But for most all of our deacons and lay folk, this might well be vacation time at best, or unpaid leave at worst. So, thank you for your gift of self to this community.

Second, I offer thanks, as always, to the diocesan staff. This group of talented, dedicated, and diverse children of God works so very hard for all of us – to pull together this Convention, yes, but also to do the work that is put before them day after day. We are blessed to have two wonderfully gifted and joyful Assistant Bishops: Gayle Harris and Mark Bourlakas; and we are blessed to have a team of experienced, creative souls working across multiple ministry disciplines to help empower the gospel work to which everyone in the Diocese of Virginia is called. I love this staff – because they love to laugh, and share, and be present with and for each other. I love this staff – because they are smart, and faithful. I love this staff – because they have become family.

I do want to make a point of saying "thank you" to one particular member of the staff – our *Chief* of Staff, Mark Eastham. Mark, as many of you know, is retiring at the end of this year. (He is making some lame excuse about wanting to spend more time with his family. Can you believe that?) Seriously, though, we are going to miss him. *I* am going to miss him.

When he told me several months ago of his plan it was like the whole universe just stopped. Mark has been one of my most valued and trusted advisors and confidants since my consecration. He has lived in fear of the many times I walk into his office and say, "I've been thinking." He listens, he acts, and he never hesitates to tell me what *he* thinks, or when I am wrong. Mark has been a partner, and an inspiration. With the help of a professional consulting firm, we will find his successor, but we will never find his replacement.

So, thank you to all of these folks, and more.

I turn now to some of the things happening around us, to the work we have done together, and the ministry to which we are called going forward.

As I said earlier, a lot has happened since we last met – it has been a big year. One big thing for me is that I got married in February. How awesome is that! I want to say a public thank you to the Reverend Charlie Dupree and the fine folks at St. Paul's, Richmond, for doing all of the things that churches do to make a wedding day special. It did turn out gloriously.

So, I got married, and Kendall and I went off on a fantastic, two-week whirlwind honeymoon – to Paris, and Belgium, and Cancun. I want to share a story with you about something that we experienced during that time – something that ended up having a bearing on the development of the theme of this Convention, a theme that builds upon the conversations of past Conventions.

As I said, one of the places that we visited was Belgium – in particular, the town of Bruges. Neither Kendall nor I had ever been there before, but we quickly came to love it.

Bruges, and most all of Belgium, is known for a few very important things – four of which are waffles, chocolate, beer, and – what we call here in the States – French Fries. Now, that last one is a bit

contentious for the Belgian people, because they argue pretty vehemently that those fried potato delicacies are only called "French" because American soldiers in WWI did not know their geography, and when they heard the Belgians who served the fries speaking French, the Yanks made the wrong assumption. Had Google Maps existed then, culinary linguistic history might be quite different. But regardless, fried potatoes, waffles, chocolate, and beer are pretty impressive things to be known for.

My story, though, centers only around the Belgian affinity for *beer*. Their *own* beer, which is a diversity of taste and potency. Belgium is home to over 400 breweries and more than 1,600 unique beers. One brewery, in the city of Bruges, currently called The Half Moon, has been brewing beer in the same location, in the heart of the historic town, for more than 500 years. The beer that they brew is popular world-wide, and is very, very good.

The popularity of this beer, though, led to some trouble a few years back. You see, historic Bruges is very quaint, with narrow, cobblestone streets lined by historic buildings and a series of beautiful canals. Trucking cases and kegs of beer out to the world became a logistical nightmare early in the 21st century, and the brewery's owners were forced to come up with a new way to deliver their product. They couldn't move the brewery, because a quality beer relies on a particular water source. Nor did they want to give up their historical roots. So they had to think up a way to get the unbottled beer out to a place that had the room to put it into containers and ship it.

So, someone said, what if we *pipe* it out? And that is what they set out to do. In 2012, the brewery started a project to run two 4-inch pipes *underground* for two miles – under centuries old construction – to a bottling plant outside of the city. The project required all manner of permits and exemptions and conversations with neighbors. And it carried a big price tag – right at $4.5 million dollars.

And here is what I love about it – to cover a substantial part of the cost, the brewery ran a GoFundMe campaign, offering a free bottle of beer every day for life to those who donated a certain amount of money. Amazingly, like the beer, the money just flowed in. And now, since 2016, all of the beer that The Half Moon Brewery produces flows through those two pipes created in large part by the people who drink the beer. You can actually see the pipes right in front of the brewery, because there is a plexiglass covered hole in the street just outside the front door that exposes them to the public. Every drop consumed is connected to a 500+ year water source, and there is no opportunity for confusion about where it comes from. (If only the Belgians had figured out how to do this with fried potatoes…)

When I began to have conversations early this year with folks around the diocese about what might be the next step in the subject of our annual Conventions, my experience in and learning from Bruges helped me dig a bit into what I believe *God* is saying to us in these days. As you know, I have asked us over these past few years to see our ministry and our calling in this diocese through the lens of six words – Love Jesus. Embody Justice. Be Disciples. We have done a whole lot of work on Discipleship and Justice at our Conventions, all because we love – and are loved by – Jesus.

Last year, our theme of *Telling our Stories, Sharing our Gifts* helped serve as a launching point to enter into conversation and work around deepening our discipleship by learning from each other; by tapping into the richness of gifts in this diocese; and by leading us to recognize that God has put what we need to do ministry right in our midst. Jesus taught by telling stories, and so it seems to be a good thing for us to do as well. Jesus changed hearts and minds using the gifts of the very people with whom he ministered. This, too, seems to be good practice for us to follow. So, I think our own experience of crowd sourcing – while not resulting in free beer for life – our experience of being in this together has helped us to move the needle ever so steadily in the correct direction.

Embody justice. Be Disciples. Tell the stories, and share the resources. We are not perfect at any of this, but I do think we have taken great strides towards it, especially in the days since we last met and recommitted to it. Let me highlight a few of the great things we are doing together.

First, we are getting better at providing the resources needed to communicate with each other, as well as with folks outside of our church buildings. I have reported in years past that we have been retooling our communications work to be more responsive and cost effective, and I believe we are in a great place with that. You will see a video report on Saturday that highlights our efforts to "make our red doors digital", and to provide high-quality resources to congregations by bringing a wide range of experts to the table. This past year, our communications team has shot videos and photos for congregations, rebuilt or created from scratch numerous church websites at a fraction of the cost that the open market would charge, and helped resource-challenged churches do the work of storytelling in creative and effective ways.

Our regular monthly electronic communiques – one specific to clergy needs and one with a broader target audience – these, as well as one or two special feature communiques each month, give updates and make announcements, and tell in-depth feature stories. We learn of congregational anniversaries and milestones; we lift up our work in marginalized communities, learn from our pilgrimages, and come to recognize the work that is still needed to be done. And while you will see in our 2027 budget a financial increase in this ministry area, we are actually spending on par or less than we did in the years before we began our restructuring. We have had to negotiate some cobblestones, so to speak, but we are using our resources wisely and effectively.

And our work on good communication is not just about the home office putting out information or providing resources. It is also about effective listening. And one area where I think we have seen the fruits of *that* effort is in the recent calling of the Reverend Edgar Otero to be our Diocesan Minister for Hispanic / Latino Communities.

For years, those communities (and others) have tried to tell us all about the need for a new intentionality in our ministry and mission among them. Well, we have heard that call, and we have stepped bravely into a new season of such intentionality. The body spoke, and we all listened. I am very thankful that we did.

Another thing that we are doing together is our work around justice issues, and racial justice issues in particular. I begin this part of my report with an update on the work that the 2021 Convention directed be done regarding Repair in the face of historic and systemic racism. Resolution R-10a called for the creation of a task force to lead us in this effort, as well as a $10 million fund to begin it.

Last year I reported that the Standing Committee and I had refreshed and restructured the Task Force, charging them to build on the good work that had gone before and to lay new groundwork for the future. To abuse my metaphor a bit, we knew that we had a good product brewing – and we needed to prepare to pipe it out into the diocese and beyond.

You will hear a video report at this Convention from the Task Force co-chairs, who will say, among other things, that their focus this year has been on "how we manage, grow, and distribute the initial $10 million reparations commitment so that it functions as a matter of justice and relationship, not (as) charity, publicity, or a one-off donation without much thought… (And that they) have been developing a rigorous roadmap (of) educational formation to help us… toward this goal." The Task Force is doing some really great work, and they deserve our thanks.

I also reported last year that the Standing Committee, Executive Board, and I had identified sufficient real estate assets that could be liquidated as a source for the $10 million fund. I reported that we were actively marketing those properties, and that given the nature of large commercial sales it might take a bit of time to get offers and cash in hand.

What I get to report this year is what I consider to be very good news: As of today, we have $7.8 million in property *under contract for sale*, and another approximately $3.5 million in property *listed* or about to be listed for sale. (If you do the math, that's over $11 million.) And, because we consider the closing of those $7.8 million in contracts to be an "any day now" situation, I plan to ask the Executive Board at its next meeting to make funds available to the Task Force up to an amount equal to a 4.5% draw on what we will soon have in the bank. The Task Force may or may not use it right away, depending on how their work progresses, but they will now have liquidity that they have not had in the past.

In addition to the work of the Truth and Reparations Task Force, the Diocese of Virginia has been engaging in some other very important justice ministries. Several congregations have been working with folks who are living in fear of deportations that would endanger their lives. It is an unfortunate reality that if I were to start listing off any of these instances, I could be adding even more danger and fear to the lives of children, women, and men who just want to work, love, and be a part of a community that recognizes and respects the value of every human being.

I will report this, though – there are clergy and laity alike working and praying and sacrificing day in and day out for our siblings in Christ who are being treated harshly simply because of the color of their skin, or nation of origin, or choice of religion. Episcopal Migration Ministries has given us a $12,000 grant to support this work, for which we are all grateful. And yet so much more is needed. Say a prayer for caregiver and cared-for alike.

And on a joyous note, the Saturday before last was a day of gathering and celebration, as we held the first of what I hope will be annual Festivals that highlight the people and cultures of Hispanic / Latino decent in our diocese. There was music, and food, and laughter, and dancing – and a whole lot of laughter when I got up to dance myself. It was a day of being the Church in a wonderful way.

Our Triangle of Hope pilgrimage continued this summer, as eleven high school students from Virginia joined similar cohorts from the Dioceses of Liverpool and Kumasi to immerse themselves in the history of the transatlantic slave trade as it played out in Ghana over the centuries. In May, I got to go to Ghana myself, along with Kendall, Canon Lee Hill, and Archdeacon Susie Harding, and I must say that it was a deeply transformative time. You will be given a report from one of our youth pilgrims, and several of them are present with us for some or all of the Convention. I encourage you to talk with them and learn a bit about their experiences.

And yet there is still so much work to do. Our Ministry for Racial Justice and Healing is leading much of that work, creating educational programs, networking resources, and slowly and steadily transforming how we do our work. Plans are underway for specialized retreats and workshops to promote healing of mind and spirit. Our work with our indigenous siblings continues and is being broadened. Our diocesan commitment – spanning vocations, racial justice ministries, the Commission on Ministry and all of its related committees – is to develop discernment and formation processes for those whose first language, the language of their heart, is Spanish. And we will be training those of us in the evaluative processes who don't speak Spanish, or who were not formed in a Hispanic / Latino culture, to be able to hear and see God through those voices and lenses.

We are still missing voices at the table; far too many gatherings lack meaningful diversity, particularly from our LGBTQ+ community, our Asian community, our Hispanic/Latino community, our Indigenous community, and our communities of African descent. We lack deep diversity, and so the same individuals get asked over and over again to do the bulk of the work. But we are committed to doing better, *and* we are seeing that commitment bear fruit in some surprising ways.

Related to that, I want to talk about the reorganization of our diocesan staff this past summer. As you may know, Deacon d'Rue Hazel – who had been serving as Canon to the Ordinary since shortly after my consecration – announced her retirement early in the year. I miss her, as I knew I would, but she has chosen the better portion and is now living the life of a full-time grandmother.

When d'Rue told me she was leaving, Chief of Staff Mark Eastham and I began the process to call her successor. We got some terrific applications, we had wonderful interviews, and we identified several individuals who would be great in the job. But I have to tell you, I heard the Holy Spirit whispering, and it caused me to step back a bit and – to once again lean in on my Bruges metaphor – to think creatively and differently about how we might best deliver the goods that God has asked us to deliver.

Through prayer and conversation, it became apparent to me that we had the resources already in-house to do some new and wonderful things. So, we gave some folks more responsibility and adjusted some roles. We shifted to a model of administrative support that is more efficient and empowers folks to use their gifts in fun and challenging ways. We flattened the hierarchy and set the stage for routine collaboration. I named Canon Lee Hill as Canon to the Ordinary and Dean of our Racial Justice and Healing Ministries, guaranteeing that everything I do as your bishop is seen through the lens of justice. We improved the diversity of voices and lived experience at the table of leadership, modeling a process that we hope to see across the whole of the Diocese of Virginia. And we did all of it, including giving additional compensation to those taking on new roles, without adding any payroll dollars or cutting any ministries.

One step at a time. One Holy Spirit guided decision at a time. That's how we get out of our landlocked places of entrenchment.

The same may be said about our other work that builds discipleship, both as individuals and as communities. I want to begin here in a place that you might not expect – in the sixth Resolve of Resolution R-3a that will come before us on Saturday, a Resolution dealing with the sin of Christian Nationalism. I will speak more on that subject later, but it is the call for *development and implementation of programs* in the Resolution that I think has bearing on this section of my address.

Often when we create and pass Resolutions that need something done, we direct one or more of our governing bodies to take the lead – typically the Standing Committee or the Executive Board. And that can be all well and good. But I want you to notice something about this proposal – the authors and the Committee on Resolutions are asking the *Council of Deans* and the *Regional Presidents* to work with our *congregations* to come up with what works in a local context, and to then share it – to pipe it out, as it were – to the whole of the diocese.

Instead of a top-down implementation of an "official program," this methodology encourages disciples to make disciples. The governing structures are there to make sure it is all appropriate – and funded – but the work is allowed to develop from the ground *up*. I really think this is the Church at its best.

This methodology of infusing energy and opportunity from the ground up, digging it into our foundation, is being seen all across Virginia in our ministries of discipleship and vocation. I have already reported that we have 18 youth delegates present with us this year, up from four last year. That's eighteen new voices and generational experiences at the table. In addition to the two deacons and seven priests we have ordained, we have welcomed 23 new priests and one new deacon to this diocese over the past twelve months, each of them bringing their own freshness and uniqueness to our community. We have *54* individuals in vocational discernment right now. We had ten folks begin seminary this academic year, studying in four different Episcopal institutions of education and formation.

And please remember – building this capacity for discernment and vocation is about more than the number of people who end up ordained; it is about raising up disciples who commit to helping others discern, form, and live fully into the ministries – both ordained *and* lay – to which we are all called through baptism.

Our Creation Care ministries are partnering with the other dioceses in and around the Chesapeake Watershed to address issues that confront us in our own geography. The team is encouraging the development of initiatives in each of our congregations; initiatives that can be inspirational and informative to all. They recognize that care of creation is a *justice* issue, and are constantly and consistently seeking ways to encourage, empower, and educate the people of the diocese to reconnect Christian discipleship and mission with the ecology of nature.

Our congregational vitality work is tailored to each community as need or opportunity arises, in a time when ministry can be very challenging. The focus of these efforts is on helping us get to know ourselves better; and to know our neighborhoods better; and to discover what it is that God is already up to in our midst. None of us should be naïve about the difficulties, and yet we must all be aware of the miraculous nature of our relationship with Jesus who loves us. While congregations have different needs, all churches have the best opportunity for growth by building bridges – or digging tunnels, if we are to lean on my metaphor – by working with neighbors in the area around the church. This moves us beyond "competing for Episcopalians" and into the reverent business of inviting people into a connection with the life-giving ministry of Jesus.

A quick commercial message at this point – there are workshops hosted by our Congregational Vitality ministry to be held on December 5th and then throughout 2027 to help us grow Christians, develop in ministry, and strengthen our churches. More information will be provided later in this Convention, so stay tuned.

Our campus ministries have been working over this past year to strengthen their approach and results. They have recently concluded a multi-year strategic review, and, while other dioceses are closing campus ministries, we will be *adding* one – as All Saints' Richmond is beginning work at the University of Richmond.

We are now in the third year of the *Lily-funded Pathways to Prayer and Practice* program, and we have just launched the second cohort of congregations creating experimental methods to involve children from birth through age ten in our liturgies and worship. There is nothing top-down about this program – every idea is generated by the people involved, and everything we learn will be shared outward.

Seventeen young people have committed to forming a Diocesan Youth Leadership Team. Our middle school and high school youth programs in congregations across Virginia have been gathering for fellowship and discipleship. And Shrine Mont Camps had a terrific summer this year, with

participation levels up across the board. Our young folks *are* participating, *and leading*, as we get the word out that Jesus loves *everyone*.

A quick note about Shrine Mont itself: The Living Stones capital campaign, launched earlier this year to fund a mixture of physical improvements to our beloved campus as well as to add to the endowment to provide stability and program development well into the future, has now raised nearly $13 million of our $15 million goal. No lifetime of free beer to our donors, but perhaps Kevin Moomaw will work out a deal for extra butt-buns if you contribute. Just sayin'.

So, there are lots of stories of good, gospel work happening here in this diocese; work that is connected to and by us all. It may be a stretch, but I think you can see why the Bruges beer pipeline, something that was made a reality by the people of the place in which it was needed, got me to thinking about our work together.

And yet, there is more to it than that. I told you that the pipeline got me thinking about a theme for this year's Convention that connected us to the work we have done, yes, *but also to something else*. Let me unpack that a bit.

Telling the stories of God working in our lives is important for us. Getting the word out about what is important *is important*. And so is recognizing when misinformation is being spread about something that we know – or should know – to be false, or even harmful.

Unfortunately, we live in a time when something that is a gift to us from God is being regularly twisted and adjusted for less than altruistic purposes. That gift, I would argue, is the very Word of God, revealed in the passages of Holy Scripture.

As I stood there on that street in Bruges last February, looking down at those two pipes connecting *source* and *destination*, it struck me that there are forces in this world in this day that want to cut us off from the One, True Source of life and love. There are people and groups who have taken the Good News and reframed it, and spun it for harm. And since so many people these days do not know the basic Christian story, it is easy to do. Way too easy.

In response, I decided to encourage us in this coming year, beginning with this Convention, to get *back to the Source* so that we can tell the full and true story. Our stories, the stories of our life and work together are important, but their importance comes from a connection to the love of God. As I said to you last year, we must re-center ourselves in and with the true love and grace of God in Christ Jesus. We must stand firm at the point where distortion gives way to clarity. As Howard Thurman wrote of Jesus, we must be "simply, directly *truthful*, whatever may be the cost in life, limb, or security." [*Jesus and the Disinherited*]

To do that, we need to read *the* Book. I mean *really read it*. We need to read and study Holy Scripture. We need to tell *that* story to everyone. We need to read the actual words of Jesus and tell *that* story because there are those who are telling a version every day on social media and network news and even from pulpits – there are people who are telling a story that is manipulated, politically motivated, fear-based, historically inaccurate, theologically shallow, xenophobic, and, in many cases, connected directly to someone's bank account.

We have to reconnect to the *historic* source; to the One who moved over the ancient water and breathed life into existence; to the One who looked at creation and called it *good*; to the One who came into the world not to condemn it but to save it; to the One who is love and not hate; to the one who is

*not* waiting for us to start a particular war in a particular place at a particular time so that permission is then given for a magic reset button to be pushed that fixes human sin. We have to reconnect to the One Source who says that the Kingdom of Heaven, the Beloved Community, is at hand now, among us and with us; just as it has been and always will be.

We know that when Jesus was led into the wilderness to be tempted, one of the things that Satan did was to use scripture *out of context* to try to trick him. Jesus responded simply by telling the truth, by telling the true story. Such is the case for us now.

If a public official offers a prayer and claims it to be based on a passage of scripture, but it is in fact from a movie that is, while a well-crafted achievement in cinema, one scene of violence after another, then we have to read the book and tell the truth – that the prayer of Jesus is that we all may be one, and that *forgiveness* should reign, and that we all be given the sustenance each and every day that we need to live the life we have been gifted with.

If preachers and politicians cite St. Paul's views on governments as a call for unwavering loyalty, we must read the book – the *whole* book – and tell the true story; that obeying laws does not mean we are to remain silent against evil, and that Jesus says that *the* law above all law is *love of God* and *love of neighbor*.

If the movement known as Christian Nationalism, in the words of Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas, seeks to baptize borders and empires, or sanctify subjugation and exclusion, or promote the notion that America or any nation or any leader of a nation stands in the place of God, we have to read the book and tell the true story – that Jesus endorses no earthly power or principality; that worshipping anything or anyone besides God is idolatry; and exclusion and "othering" are, in the words of Jesus's parables, the ways of weeds and goats, not of wheat and sheep.

If officials suggest broadcasting an execution on the internet and there is even the briefest moment where decision makers pause in consideration, it is then that we must read the book and tell the story of how Truth itself was murdered on a hillside at high noon as a public spectacle in order to empower the state. We must, as has been said often of late, shout out the truth that we cannot kneel before the crucified Christ and at the same time cheer for the machinery of oppression, or of death.

In the manipulations of our time, we must remain *connected* to the *true source*. The water of life must flow, not the blood of envy or greed. We *must read the book*. We *must tell the story*.

As I draw my address to a close, I have one more tale I want to share.

One of the best parts of being Bishop of Virginia is Sunday worship in the congregations across this diocese. There are fun things on other days, but Sundays are the best. A few weeks ago, I got to spend a Sunday morning at Iglesia San Jose, in Arlington. That day I had the honor of baptizing a seven-year-old boy named Thiago. From the moment I met him he was full of positive energy, with a nonstop, broad smile that was simply infectious.

At the time of the baptism, Fr. Bryan helped lift him up to the font. As I poured the first handful of water on his forehead and said, "I baptize you in the Name of the Father", Thiago shivered and said, "That's cold!" We all chuckled.

When I hit him with the second dose – "and of the Son" – he looked up with a big smile and said, "still cold!" To which Fr. Bryan said, "just one more!"

Then the third splash of water – "and of the Holy Spirit" – and I whispered, "It's all done. You're baptized."

At which point he hit the ground, pumped his fists, and said, "*Yes!*"

Now, I really don't think he was just glad the cold-water treatment was over. I think, in that moment, he understood God in a way that I wish we all could, every moment of our life. He understood that God is joy and inclusion – regardless of how cold and insufferable and maybe even dangerous life can be. I think that in that moment, Thiago was free from the manipulations and misrepresentations and prejudices of our day. I think that in that moment he made a connection to the true source of life and faith and hope. And I think that in that moment he knew that God wants nothing for him or for any of us that is not love.

Read the book, my friends, and then go tell the story. Let there be no confusion about what it is, or where it comes from, or where it leads.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. Amen.