

Renewing Our Baptismal Vows

Joshua 24; Luke 3:12-17, 21-22

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Baptism of the Lord Sunday

You may or may not be aware that the first Sunday after Epiphany on the church's liturgical calendar is called *Baptism of the Lord Sunday*. It is a time for remembering and reflecting on both the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the Jordan River and our own baptisms, whether we were baptized as infants and have to rely on what we were told or whether we were believers and can actually remember the experience. But beyond this remembering and reflecting it is also appropriate and even essential for the people of God to renew, reclaim, reaffirm, and recommit to the vows we made when we professed our faith and united with the church as members of the Lord's band of disciples, or what I like to refer to the church as "the company of the committee," the tittle Elton Trueblood gave to his powerful and still even more relevant book about the church more than fifty years ago. Do you remember what you professed and promised when you joined the church? Do those promises still shape your faith and your life?

The timing seemed right for me to include this renewal of our Baptism vows in our worship this morning. The new confirmation class began last week and will be preparing our youth and their families to understand what discipleship and membership entails. This morning I met with the second grade Sunday school class as they recalled the meaning and significance of baptism as a sacrament and then the details of their own baptisms.

I shared with them something that I recalled from a little book written by Virginia Cary Hudson way back in 1904 when she was just a child of ten. It is her observations and commentaries on the customs and mores of 19th century America and it is both humorous and insightful. The title of the little book is: "O Ye Jig's and Juleps!" and I'll bet some of the older ones among us will remember it fondly. At any rate, at one point she is trying to explain what a sacrament is and she writes:

Sacraments are what you do in church. What you do at home is something else. Cooking, sewing and running the Bissel sweeper and eating and sleeping and praying and scrubbing yourself are not sacraments.

When you are little and ugly and somebody carries you in church on a pillow and you come out a child of God and inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven. They pour water on your head and that's a sacrament.

But it is not just for the benefit of our children and youth that we are emphasizing baptism and the promises made and received during that sacrament. We adults need reminders too and it is most appropriate for us to examine and renew our Baptismal vows, and

perhaps never more so than when a congregation is entering a time of transition and preparing to call new leadership for the future of the church.

One of the tasks of an Interim Pastor is to see that the membership rolls of the church are cleaned up, and accurate, that we know who intends to actively live out their Christian discipleship as active members of the church and who no longer intends to keep their vows and promises once made. My guess is that there are probably hundreds of people in this supposedly 3,000-member church who have become over time simply names on a roll and members who have no intention or desire to live out their discipleship through the life and ministry of this church. Your new pastor, not to mention your Lord, needs to know who can be counted on to worship, to study, to give of their time, talents and treasure, to serve God and neighbor, and to offer leadership and support to the church and the larger community. So today we are inviting everyone to reclaim and renew those vows of your baptismal covenant.

It may have not been a custom of this church to have a covenant renewal service such as this on a regular basis, but it has been done on occasion. It is important, I believe, to do it again at this critical time in the life of this grand old church, as we begin a mission study and a survey of our members to determine who we are and what we intend to be and do as a community of faith and as disciples, as we make ready to search for the next pastor of this church.

Dr. Wallace Alston, a wonderful Presbyterian pastor and author now retired and living in Castine, Maine, came and preached in a former church where I served more than thirty years ago. He argued on that occasion that church members ought to be required to re-up annually, as it were, to re-enlist in the membership of the church and to recommit ourselves to Christ's service every year so as not to take our discipleship for granted or forget our sacred promises. In a sense, Alston was arguing for a service of renewal of our baptismal vows long before our church ever included such a service as this one in our *Book of Common Worship*.

So, today's worship service affords us the opportunity to renew our baptismal vows as we respond to God's grace and call. As we remember and reaffirm our own promises and intentions, I pray that we too, like Jesus in his own baptism will find both comfort and challenge. Coincidentally, next Sunday God willing and the TSA agents back at work, I will be standing in the Jordan River leading nearly sixty other Presbyterians in another service of baptism renewal.

Early Protestants and Reformers certainly saw the significance of baptism. Martin Luther urged Christians to practice the daily renewal of their baptismal covenant by placing a hand on their head each morning and saying, "I am a baptized person, and today I will live out my baptism." When he was going through his own "dark night of the soul," Luther took great comfort in the knowledge that he had been baptized, that God had claimed him as his own even though he had gone through times of disobedience, despair and doubt. John Calvin wrote in his *Institutes* that while our human propensity toward evil never ceases, we can take courage because what "begins in our baptism" can be pursued every day until we go to be with the Lord. And we can affirm with the Apostle Paul what he wrote to the Philippians in 2:6 "And I am

sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”

Nothing so shapes our lives as those promises we believe and receive and in response those promises we make to ourselves and others. Surely one of the traits that distinguishes humans from all others in the animal kingdom is that we are capable of making and keeping promises, of entering into covenant agreements. We may fail to live up to those vows but at least we have the potential for doing so. And this may be part of what it means to have been created “in the image of God. Like our God we are covenantors. We can agree to live and act in a way that goes against our instincts, our personal desires and even our individual welfare in an effort to serve a greater good. So, we make promises or take vows at significant moments in our lives – when we baptize our children, join the church, become U.S. citizens, join the military, or profession and civic associations, and when we enter into a covenant of marriage. Nearly every year some married couples asks me to conduct a service for the renewal of their marriage vows.

So today at the beginning of a new year and the commencement of a new season in the life of this church let us recall and recommit to those promises and agreements once made.

To be sure, this may be a timely and appropriate thing to do but it is really nothing new. Under the old covenant in ancient Israel the people of God would gather every year at Shechem (modern-day Nablus for those of you who have visited Israel and the people would re-tell the story of their redemption, the long saga of God’s grace and mercy and blessings in abundance. Then they would read from the Law what God required of them if they wanted to live as his distinct people. Finally, they would profess their desire and intent to obey and to worship and serve only the living God.

What I read to you from Joshua 24 was the first such covenant renewal ceremony after the Israelites had invaded and captured the land of promise under Joshua’s leadership — though the real deliverer was the Lord and not either Joshua or his troops. (v.12.) God alone gave them the land and its victory.

In other annual covenant renewal ceremonies at Shechem after sacrifices were offered to the Lord the tribes of Israel and their priests would line up, half in front on Mt. Gerizim and half in front of Mt. Ebal. The blessings that would follow from obedience and from service to the God who has delivered and blessed them would be read and then the curses that would follow from disobedience and allegiance to foreign gods were read and the people would re-affirm their loyalty and their intention to obey and worship God alone. The two mountains in Shechem became symbolic of life and worship devoted to God or in defiance of God. Mt. Gerizim is verdant and forested as the mount of blessing while Mt. Ebal, the mount of curses, is stark and barren.

This covenant renewal ceremony was a public witness to their allegiance to God and his covenant with them and their need to be held accountable for their worship and their living. It was necessary because people, like sheep, tend to go astray, to forget our vows and promises and to become negligent of our duties and lackadaisical about our loyalty.

Remembering our baptism and our entering into a new covenant with God through Jesus Christ is a source of comfort and encouragement to us all but it is also an incentive to more intentional efforts to better live and better serve as disciples of Jesus Christ. Renewing our vows enables us to take stock of our personal relationship with Christ. It encourages us to ask the hard questions of self-examination: Are we truly committed to Jesus Christ and not simply as Savior but also as Lord? Does our giving and our living reveal that commitment and that lordship? Have we opened ourselves up to the Lord's presence and leading every aspect of our lives, not keeping him out of certain arenas: Are our business practices honest and ethical? Are our family dynamics loving and forgiving? Are our leisure pursuits healthy and helpful? Are our politics informed by our faith commitments and by the example of Jesus Christ? If our answers to these questions are "yes" then we are being better prepared to face the uncertainties and challenges that are before us in our own day as baptized believers? We thus are strengthened and inspired for more effective and more fulfilling discipleship. When temptations arise, and trials come, as they invariably will, we too can remember **who** we are and **whose** we are and we can be reminded of the promises we have received and made when we first embraced Jesus Christ and united with his church.

In closing, you may have noticed that the baptismal font has been moved for today's service to a spot nearer to where most of us enter and leave this place of worship. We enter the church through our baptism and encourage you as you leave the church following this renewal of the baptismal covenant that you pass by the font, touch the water as a tangible reminder, a symbol of your washing, and your inclusion in God's family, and thereby remember and celebrate your baptism into the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

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