

January 13, 2019
Baptism of the Lord

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Promises Promises

Mark 1:4-11 (The Message)

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of life-changing that leads to the forgiveness of sins. People thronged to him from Judea and Jerusalem and, as they confessed their sins, were baptized by him in the Jordan River into a changed life. John wore a camel hair habit, tied at the waist with a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild field honey. As he preached he said, The real action comes next: the star in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stage hand, will change your life. I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. His baptism--a holy baptism the Holy Spirit--will change you from the inside out. At this time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. The moment he came out of the water, he saw the sky split open and God's Spirit, looking like a dove, come down on him. Along with the Spirit, a voice: "You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life."

Prayer for illumination

In the covenant of baptism you have cleansed us. In Christ you have lifted us above the powers and authorities of this world to higher loyalties. Make plain to us now, O God, what you expect of us. Clear our consciences and fill our lives with new purpose. We pray in Jesus' name.

Introduction

The French novelist and poet, Francois Coppee, was a member of the French Academy. He was approached by the spouse of a not too distinguished writer. The woman asked Coppee to vote for her husband when he was proposed for membership in the Academy. "I beg you, vote for my husband," she pleaded. "If he's not elected, he'll die." So, Coppee agreed, but even with his vote, the writer was not elected. And, the individual did not, in fact, die.

A few months later, there was another vacancy in the Academy, and the woman returned and asked Coppee to vote for her husband again. "No," said Coppee. "I kept my promise . . . but he did not keep his!"

Human beings are promise-makers, but not always the best promise keepers. We make promises in virtually every arena of life. Politicians make outlandish campaign promises only to break them. We promise to colleagues or clients: "The report will be in your hands by Friday." We promise our Doctors that we will lower our cholesterol. We promise family

members: "Trust me, I will never do that again." "I promise, Mom, I'll come home right after the game." We are perpetually making promises in church: In marriage vows: "I do promise and covenant before God and these witnesses... When we gather at the baptismal font. In response to God's promise, Parents pledge to live out their faith and to teach that faith to their children. The faith community promises to guide and nurture those baptized. Even the children make a promise.

Baptism story

It was after the baptism of his baby brother, little Johnny sobbed all the way home. His father asked him over and over what was wrong. Finally, the boy replied, "The pastor had you promise to bring us up in a Christian home, but I want to stay with you guys."

Human beings are promise-makers, but not always the best promise keepers.

A promise is a word that goes forth into unfilled time. It reaches ahead of its speaker and its recipient, to mark an appointment between them in the future. A promise may be the assurance of continuing or future action on behalf of someone. It may be a solemn agreement of lasting relationship. It may be the announcement of a future event.

Every single thing we say we will do -- everything that is not fulfilled the moment we say it -- everything that implies a future fulfillment -- is a promise, whether we call it that or not.

Jewish philosopher Martin Buber once said it's the ability to make a promise that lies at the heart of the religious enterprise. It's the ability to say "I pledge, I vow, I solemnly swear (cross my heart and hope to die)" that enables us to give our allegiance to ideals and principles that outlast the self and connect the idle drift of days into a history with a lasting sense of purpose. Promises are how we keep faith with God, with one another and join our lives in love and loyalty to something larger than ourselves.

Craig Dykstra, a scholar of religious education, claims that making promises is at the heart of being a family. It is how a group of people commit themselves "to a particular way of moving through the present and into the future."^[1] These are the promises that echo in the waters of baptism. Promises that bind us to together with all of God's children as we move into the future. Promises that inspire our hearts and spirits and spur us into authentic discipleship.

In "A Man for All Seasons", the drama about Sir Thomas Moore, there's a scene where Moore explains to his daughter Margaret how he cannot go back on an oath he made even if his life depended on it. "When a man makes a promise, Meg, he puts himself in his own hands, like water. And if he opens up his fingers to let it out, he need not hope to find himself again."

Open fingered promises are what the mythical figure Mary Poppins called "Pie-crust promises. Easily made and easily broken."

Yes, human beings are promise-makers, but not always the best promise keepers. On this Sunday when we make and renew promises made for us in baptism. When we respond to God's promises fulfilled in Jesus Christ. When we hear promises made in ordination vows and make promise to help those who have been elected to fulfill those vows.

May the sky split open, a dove descend, and the Spirit of God be able to say: "You are my children, chosen and marked by my love, with whom I am well pleased."

Closing Prayer

God of the waters. Birth us. Connect us. Confront us. Convict us. Live in us.
Trouble us. Calm us.

In the covenant of baptism you have cleansed us. In Christ you have lifted us above the powers and authorities of this world to higher loyalties. Make plain to us now, O God, what you expect of us. Clear our consciences and fill our lives with new purpose. We pray in Jesus' name.

You hold in your hands a vessel – containing fluid. During the offertory – you are invited to empty that water pack into the font. Anything that gets in the way of you fulfilling your promises – hatred, anger, bad attitude, hurts, grudges, failures, jealousy, pride, mistakes made, poor choices with which you have to live...

Bring it to the font and empty it. Let go of it. Turn it over to Christ – you will have the opportunity to refill your vessels at the conclusion of worship.

¹ Craig Dykstra *Growing in the Life of Faith – Education and Christian Practices* (Louisville, Geneva Press, 1999) p 98. See also W. Bradley Wigger's new book, *The Power of God At Home: Nurturing Our Children In Love and Grace* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).