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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, January 12, 2020
The Baptism of Our Lord/Lectionary 1/Proper X/Year A
First Reading: Isaiah 42:1-9
Second Reading: Acts 10:34-43
Gospel Reading: Matthew 3:13-17
Sermon Title: "Faithful to Our Calling"

Theme

Before Jesus begins his ministry, he is baptized by John, touched by the Spirit, and identified publicly as God's child.

Text

¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Sermon

"Covenant" is an interesting word. A secular definition would be a legal contract. When I moved into my condo community, I was given the covenant, an agreement to live by the covenants, the list of rights and obligations of living there.

It's not a new concept, of course. The Old and New Testaments are full of language about God's, covenants, agreements with human beings. Of course the word "testament" means "covenant" and the word "covenant" is something like our word "will" as in "last will and testament." The only difference is that God isn't dead, and yet we still get to inherit.

We ought to be familiar with the word in church because we hear it every time we gather, and yet we tend to forget that this "new covenant" we live in, was made with Christ's own body and blood. We will hear it again in this worship service in about thirty minutes. We ought never to lose our awareness that this "new covenant" Jesus sealed when he died on the cross for our sins and for the sins of the whole world.

We have been applying covenantal language to many aspects of ministry and membership around here for many years now. It occurred to me early in my ordained ministry that the church, the larger church, not just this one or the previous churches I have served, we, the church, tend to give *certificates* of membership, and *certificates* of baptism, and *certificates* of confirmation, and so on.

But, as I understand it, a certificate recognizes achievement and certifies a skill. When I graduated from high school, college, or seminary, I got a certificate which certifies to any future employer that I have a certain level of knowledge and set of skills. This is not what we do in the church.

Last Saturday, when we baptized Liam Fortunato, we made his parents and sponsors agree to a bunch of obligations, and we did not proceed with the baptism until they agreed. Next weekend, we will do the same thing to Joseph and Samantha McMahon who wish to have their son, Samuel, baptized. It is the agreement to the obligations of baptism that they must agree to, that makes baptism a covenantal agreement. And so, at the conclusion of the baptism, they will get a covenant, a thing that requires three signatures. I represent God, usually it is the Council President who represents

the local church, and the parents and sponsors or godparents of the baptized represent themselves as we together seal the Covenant of Baptism.

This covenantal understanding is consistent with our Lutheran emphasis on the significance of baptism and its place in our life of faith and commitment to ongoing discipleship. We are never done, never certified. Rather, we are disciples of Jesus Christ, constantly sitting at his knees, metaphorically speaking, learning what it means to be Christ-like; what it means to be *faithful to our calling*.

Today's Gospel Reading is Jesus' encounter with his cousin, John the Baptist, at the River Jordan. I hope John would horrify our ushers if he turned up in church today. He wore a smelly old camel skin, didn't cut his hair, probably only washed by accident when he waded into the Jordan River, more a dirty stream than the river you probably have in mind, and he ate an extraordinary diet of bugs and wild honey. I wonder if those were bugs dipped in wild honey or perhaps wild-honey coated bugs?

Even worse, John the Baptist was blunt. As I have thought about John, I suspect he could not help himself. He was driven by God to speak what God put on his heart and mind, and he didn't pretty it up. Many of us would probably say that we like blunt people – people that speak frankly, directly.

No we don't! We may know where we stand with them, but who wants to stand feeling guilty? John had been telling off every part of the community and urging them to "repent" a word which literally means to turn around and walk in a new direction. He even told off the equivalent of bishops, pastors, councils, and the ELCA Churchwide Assembly. And he didn't stop with religious professionals. He spoke bluntly to secular leaders too. In the end, it was his bluntness against Herod and his wife that cost him his head.

Jesus met this wild-looking preacher at the river and asked to be baptized. John didn't want to do it. He knew that his cousin needed no baptism; didn't need to turn around. But he acquiesced to his request, and as Jesus was baptized a voice was heard by some, and they believed that they were hearing God, and in what they heard, God confirmed that Jesus was God's own Son and, about Jesus, God was well-pleased. Wow! What it must have been like to have been there.

What has all this to do with a covenant? I'm so glad you asked. Probably all of us have been baptized. When water was poured on our heads, God adopted us. It is a covenantal agreement. We became children of God and heirs of God's kingdom. But like all covenants, our Covenant of Baptism comes with both rights and obligations.

On each of our foreheads there was put an invisible sign of the cross, marked in holy oil, which signifies that we have been adopted by God and have become members of Christ's body, the church. That oil seals the deal. Oh the oil washes off; the cross never does. In Christian vocabulary, the word "member" doesn't mean someone *who joins*, but rather, as the apostle Paul reminded us, it means someone who *is joined* to someone or something. Like the limbs and organs of a human body, we are joined to Jesus and to each other. As an aside, many evangelical churches cares little about *joining the church and membership*, a vestige of the old traditional church, they would say, but I think that that says something about the commitment to the baptismal covenant by both parties, but I digress.

Being joined to Jesus in a sense means that we share in who Jesus is. In scripture, Jesus is described as serving three important roles among other things; prophet, priest, and king.

Prophet: The Covenant of Baptism means then, that first, because we are joined to Jesus, through baptism, we are to be members of a "prophetic" community. That doesn't mean that we go around making up new things about the future. A prophet is someone who says, "This is what God says," or as is often repeated in the Old Testament, "thus says the Lord." And we all know what God says because we are here and we learn what God says from scripture. And above all, we are prophetic when we live as Jesus lived. As Jesus' body, the church, we belong to a forgiving, loving, caring Jesus-community. Our job is to tell the world that God is love and God is forgiveness. Telling also means living; and living means being practical and demonstrating what a loving, forgiving, caring community looks like right where we are.

Priest: The Covenant of Baptism means that because we are joined to Jesus through baptism, we are members of a "priestly" community. Priests, in Jesus day, were intermediaries; priests represented the people to God and represented God to the people, normally in Jewish and Christian tradition in rituals and meals. Martin Luther was famous for coining the phrase, the "priesthood of all believers." In other words,

we don't get a choice, if we are in a covenantal relationship with God revealed in Jesus Christ, we are his priests. As priests then, we say to the world of the Body of Christ, our church, "Here is God loving you through Jesus." And we say to God, "Here is the world yearning to be loved through Jesus." In Holy Communion we invite the world to eat and drink with God and to receive God's Son through the Spirit. They belong here. We belong together.

But that isn't the only place we, the Body of Christ, are Christ for the world. This Sunday, members of Zion are feeding the poor and hungry at Red Door, and next Saturday is our own Food Distribution. When we serve the least of these, we are living out our baptismal covenant.

King: The Covenant of Baptism means that because we are joined to Jesus through baptism, we are members of a "kingly" community. Kings, or at least good kings, are supposed to rule the earth for God and for everyone. Jesus is the Good King and in covenant with him through our baptisms, we are to care for all creation; the earth, all beings, human and animal, and love and serve them sacrificially.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

So that invisible sign of the cross on our foreheads shows everyone that we are covenant people.

Yet two other points must be remembered. Alone we cannot be or do any of these covenant things. Alone we are like those sheep we hear about in the parables of Jesus. Left to ourselves we stray and go our own way, and that is simply not the way God intends us to be. Oh, don't misunderstand me, alone we can do many good things, but then they are just that, good things. When we act alone, we miss all the benefits of the Body of Christ.

We are to act like God's people, and when we fail, we are to repent and ask God to forgive us and renew us. And so, often, like today, we have the opportunity, yes, the opportunity to confess our failures. I say opportunity because to be all that we need to be within the Body of Christ, we need to shed the burden of guilt and shame so we are freed to try again.

Secondly, we need feeding if we are to grow in strength. If baptism begins our covenant life, in Holy Communion we receive Jesus Christ into the very core and fiber of our beings as we live in him and him in us.

Inheritance is one thing, a very wonderful thing. God's covenant tells us that we have inherited God's Word, God's sacraments, God's world, and God's blessing of eternal life. Yet we must also listen to John the Baptist who call us to repent. Unlike Jesus, we have need to turn around and walk in God's ways all the days of our lives. That is what it means for us to be faithful to our calling.

Prayer

Loving God, who are we that you would want a covenant relationship with us? Our track record is not very good. We've accomplished little that is good and we often live lives unto our own liking, leaving you out altogether. And yet, through the ministry of John the Baptizer, you call us to repent; no excuses needed, no penance required, just a sincere acknowledgment that without you revealed in our Lord Jesus Christ, we are nothing.

This week, cause each one of us to fuss with what it means to be *faithful to our calling*. And then LORD, send us your Holy Spirit to want to renew and guide our efforts. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen