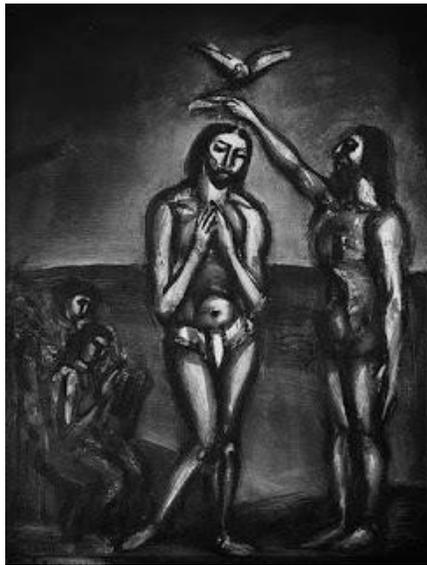




SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, JANUARY 12, 2020
THE FEAST OF THE BAPTISM OF CHRIST
ISAIAH 42:1-9; PSALM 29; ACTS 10:34-43; MATTHEW 3:13-17

BELOVED



Matthew 3:13-17 [*Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And 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. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."*]

Did you hear the one about the child in Sunday School who always liked pleasing the teacher by answering her questions? When she asked, what is brown, furry, has a bushy

tail, and likes to chew nuts, the little boy paused with a wrinkled brow. He was used to getting the answer right, and it sounded like a squirrel, but this was Sunday School after all,

so he raised his hand to be called on, and blurted out his final answer: “Jesus!”

When I was in seminary, my classmates ribbed me because of my predisposition to make every conversation about “the baptismal covenant.” It was my frame of reference, my final answer for all things. So when I arrived at my first church to serve as a brand new priest, fresh from the ivory towers, with a sincere naiveté, I went to work feverishly promoting the Baptismal Covenant at every turn. I developed this really nice Powerpoint presentation for the vestry, demonstrating how our life together is guided by the precepts of our Baptismal Covenant. I preached topical sermons on the Baptismal Covenant more than once in those first few months. The Adult Forum sessions that first fall were either overtly or covertly appropriations of the Baptismal Covenant.

It took me about a year to have enough space from seminary to reflect on my approach, and it was then that the image came to me—a rather humbling image—that I thought if I said Baptismal Covenant often enough, and then clicked my heels three times, we’d all be

catapulted to the Kingdom of God right here and now.

Well, as you may have surmised, it didn’t happen quite like I figured. Oh, don’t get me wrong, I still believe our Baptismal Covenant is as clear and concise a mission statement as there is—as individuals, as a community of faith, as the Body of Christ...I still think it is the best way for us to order our lives, but what I have learned in the process of talking about the covenant is that words do not constitute the covenant. A written covenant points beyond the words to something more existential, more compelling in our lives.

If it were just the words, then it would be probably more apt to call it a contract. A contract specifies elements to which the parties agree—I will do this, and you agree to do that. It’s cut and dried, and if one party breaches the contract, the other party has recourse which usually involves seeking damages and almost always involves severing the relationship. The handshake goes only so far as the contract specifies.

But God does not seem to be much interested in contracts. If that were the case, I think God

would have walked away from humanity long ago—breach of contract has been a recurrent problem. But God establishes covenants instead.

Covenantal relationships transcend the words themselves, because something more is involved. Ethicists call it a primal gift that is given and received in the covenant. It is this primal gift which opens the parties to the possibility of change, of transformation—such that the bond is strengthened. In very profound ways the two become one, part of a whole...and the synergy of that connection can change the world.

The pattern is there throughout our tradition actually. We need only look to Isaiah as he describes the relationship between God and the Servant, whom God upholds, in whom God delights. This is covenantal imagery that weaves a brilliant tapestry bound together by God's love and a resulting identity of belovedness. That is the primal gift. Belovedness.



And when the heavens open at Jesus' baptism, and God says *This is my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well-pleased*, this is covenantal imagery as well. The Father and the Son, bound together by more than just words of agreement—and surely transformation occurs, not just for those two but for the whole world.ⁱⁱ

But if you were to read on in the gospel what follows immediately is that Jesus finds himself in a wilderness experience. And we know it as well—that baptism and the covenant forged in it do not inoculate us against wilderness experiences. And while the temptation may be to assume we must find our own way through the wilderness, making it out by our own sheer will, that seems awfully presumptuous an approach.

Even Jesus had the Spirit and angels making their way along with him. He was not alone. Nor are we, in the wilderness, or ever, even though it might feel that way sometimes.

The primal gift of the covenant—that belovedness—cannot be broken, even when we breach the covenant, because God is the other partner in the relationship, always holds onto us, even when we let go, and we can trust in that steadfast love and mercy, two parts of the whole, both given profusely, abundantly, eternally, for our sakes.

Which is why we baptize on Sunday mornings, in the midst of community, having long since abandoned “private baptisms.” Boy, if there was ever an oxymoron, that is it—private baptism.

We baptize in the community’s worship service so that we are reminded we do not have to go it alone.

Which is why everyone present is asked a question in which you pledge to support the baptismal candidates in their life in Christ, and why we invite you to sign the baptismal testimonials on the welcome table in the back. We do not have to go it alone.

Which is why we will renew our Baptismal Covenant together in a few moments, declaring once more who believe God to be, who we believe ourselves to be, and how we believe God is calling us to live. Five simple questions, which we answer, together, affirming these practices, and committing to live by them, with God’s help. We need not go it alone.

You are beloved, God’s beloved, and this community exists to remind us all of that sublime truth at every turn.

So remember your baptism, letting holy water light on your face, trust in your belovedness, and let that identity guide your life.

It is living water which will sustain us, even in the wilderness.

And remember, the covenantal bond established by God is indissoluble. You are God’s child, God’s beloved always and forever.

ⁱ <http://breakopenword.blogspot.com/>

ⁱⁱ Image from <https://www.google.com/search?q=beloved+at+baptism&sour>

ce=lnms&tbn=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiJgZr5s_rmAhUXvZ4KHd-3ABYQ_AUoAnoECA0QBA&biw=1280&bih=607#imgrc=_