

*Children of the Covenant*  
Genesis 17: 1-12; Acts 16: 11-15  
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## **I. Introduction**

About the year 445 C.E., St. Patrick was traveling through his bishopric of Ireland, converting great numbers of people. He entered the kingdom of Munster and met its king Aengus. The King was already familiar with Christianity and was pleased with the effect it was having on his people, and asked the saint to baptize him. St. Patrick was happy to comply, and the king assembled all his courtiers for the ceremony.

Now St. Patrick, as Bishop, carried his episcopal staff, which had a sharp iron spike at the end, which he could plant in the ground when he was preaching. But, by accident, he stuck this in King Aengus' foot. After the baptism was over, St. Patrick looked down at all the blood, realized what he had done, and begged the king's forgiveness. "Your Majesty, why didn't you say something?" the saint asked. The king replied, "I thought it was part of the ritual."

A lot of us have walked around for years with some odd ideas about the sacrament of Baptism, which is to be expected, because our doctrine of Baptism has evolved over the years, and we don't always do a particularly good job of teaching about it. This Lent, we are reflecting on the two sacraments of our church: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. We're doing this during Lent, because Lent is the time of our church year when we try to deepen our journey of discipleship through re-engaging our spiritual disciplines. And from the point of view of our Methodist heritage, sacraments are one of those spiritual disciplines.

John Wesley referred to the sacraments as one of the "means of grace," by which he meant that they were gifts that God has given us for the transformation of our lives. In addition to bringing together a social justice focus and an emphasis on evangelical piety, Wesley's Methodist revival was a sacramental revival. Wesley believed passionately that his Methodist followers needed to participate in the sacraments on an ongoing basis. And this Lent will be an opportunity to reclaim that sacramental emphasis.

## **II. Setting the Record Straight**

In the fourth century, St. Augustine of Hippo first articulated the doctrine of original sin, which stated that we were all "infected" by the consequences of the fall of Adam and were born sinful. Baptism was seen as the cleansing of this original sin, leaving us free from sin's penalty. Since we were born into sin, in an age of great infant mortality the church became concerned about the salvation of infants, and so encouraged parents to have children baptized quickly, so that their sin would be purged and they could enter heaven, should they die.

Many of the Protestant reformers rebelled against this idea, and began emphasizing the role of baptism as a kind of mnemonic device, reminding us of God's claim on our lives. This was a

helpful development, although later Protestants became concerned that the Reformation placed too great an emphasis on the rational elements of the sacrament. The pietist tradition emphasized how important it was for people engaging in sacramental worship to *feel* the movement of God in their hearts for the sacrament to mean anything. A lot of us continue to carry this sense of the sacraments; and I hear people say with some regularity, for example, that they won't take communion unless their heart is in the right place.

The important idea that all of this misses is that *God* is the primary actor in Baptism, not me; so *my* ability to understand what is happening in the sacrament, or *my* feeling of connection with God, is not really the point. Baptism is *God's* promise to us of new life. It is *God's* claiming us as God's own, and making us the people we were created to be. Baptism is God's promise to us; and God never breaks God's promises.

This is why, in our church, we NEVER re-baptize people. All pastors get asked periodically if we will re-baptize someone. Usually, that happens when someone was baptized as an infant, and falls away from the church, and then returns to a life of faith. They are looking for some way to acknowledge the change in their life, and want to recommit themselves by having another Baptism and reasserting their vows.

While emotionally, that's a lovely idea; theologically, that's still making Baptism about us. It's not about us; it's about God. God *never* breaks God's promise, and to re-baptize would be to call that promise into question. *We* may fall away from God, but God never falls away from us.

In Baptism, God marks us as God's own. God claims us and gives us a new identity. We are no longer sinners in search of redemption: we are God's own daughters and sons; we are a royal priesthood, co-creators with God, as God seeks to heal a broken world. Our salvation is not merited or earned, it is a gift that transforms us, often even before we are aware of it.

### III. Creating Family

So if God is the primary actor in Baptism, the secondary actor is the community of faith. We talked a little last week about the fact that sacraments are *always* communal actions. Baptism is the sacrament of initiation in which *the community* reaffirms its covenant with God as it welcomes in a new member. This is why we baptize infants in our church: if the covenant of Baptism was just between God and the person being Baptized, then it would make no sense to Baptize people until they were old enough to understand the covenant they were entering into.

We Baptize infants because *their* ability to understand what is happening is irrelevant to the process. It is we as the gathered community of believers that are the ones saying the vows. Baptism, for us, plays the same role that circumcision plays in the Jewish community (and if given the choice, opt for Baptism!). Circumcision – as you heard in today's Hebrew Scripture lesson – takes place when a boy is eight days old and is the rite by which *the community* affirms its covenantal relationship with God, as it welcomes in a new member.

[Let me say parenthetically here that our Baptist brothers and sisters will point out that there are no infant Baptisms recounted in Scripture, only adults. While technically, that may be true, one obvious reason for that is that the New Testament is telling the story of a first generation church, so naturally they are going to be adults primarily. More significantly, however, most Biblical scholars will point out that there are several places in the New Testament – such as in our passage from Acts this morning – in which a convert is baptized “with their whole household.” The Greek word used for “household” is οἶκος, which is a word that would never have been used if children were not involved. So there is some fairly strong evidence that there were, in fact, infants baptized in the early church.]

At the heart of this understanding of Baptism is the idea that none of us comes into a saving relationship with God on our own. We come to know God, because we are taught who God is by the people around us. It is how we are nurtured and developed that allows us to know God and to recognize God’s presence in our lives.

It is we as the gathered community of believers who, in the Baptismal covenant, renew our covenant with God, and who promise – within the context of that covenant – to raise up the new member being baptized. And I want to hold that promise before us this morning as a critical one. At every baptism, we repeat the words that *we* will help nurture this person in the faith, so that he or she has the opportunity to come to know God.

I am here preaching this morning, because of several such persons. When I was in ninth grade, the woman who had been my fifth and sixth grade Sunday school teacher, wrote me a letter saying that she knew that when people got to be 13 or so, they sometimes needed adults other than their parents to talk to, and she wanted me to know that she was there for me. Ms. Farnham taught me how to pray and helped me process my first feelings of a call to ministry.

When I graduated from High School, Ned Bachman gave me two books by Albert Camus, along with the offer to talk about them. I became a philosophy major, in part, because of Ned; and he and I and my friend Dave Larsen met regularly during my first years of college to talk about Camus and the other philosophers we were studying. All of us have the opportunity to have a life changing impact on the young people in our church, and in the baptism ritual, we promise to take advantage of that.

But parents, that does not let you off the hook! You also are taking a vow to raise up your children in the way that leads them to eternal life. And it strikes me sometimes, that we don’t always bring the seriousness to that promise as it deserves. Not infrequently, I hear parents tell me, “I’m not going to impose my religious beliefs on my child, I want them to find their own way.” Well, Friends, that’s a cop out. We impose our values on our children all the time. We let them know that education is important, or political engagement is important. Why do we shy away from sharing with them the importance of our faith? Parenting is largely about passing on values to our children, helping them become the people God meant for them to be.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In 1971, and very young and afro'ed Jessie Jackson appeared on Sesame Street and introduced to a group of children his poem "I am Somebody." It's a poem that he went on to use in churches and civil rights rallies across the country for years afterwards. In it, he says, "I may be poor, but I am somebody. I may be young, but I am somebody. ..."

Baptism, is God's promise, that we are somebody. It's an affirmation that regardless of what we do, or how we fall short of God's call, we are still God's. We are a chosen people, a royal priesthood. We can't earn it, or even work on it; we just need to accept it. It's not something we do. On our very deepest level, it's who we are.

Amen.