

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Epiphany and Baptism of the Lord Sunday
January 8, 2023

Isaiah 42:1-9, Matthew 3:13-17

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Isaiah 42:1-9

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights;

I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.

² He will not cry out or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street;

³ a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;

he will faithfully bring forth justice. ⁴ He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth, and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

⁵ Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it:

⁶ I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

⁸ I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.

⁹ See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Matthew 3:13-17

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15 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. 16 And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Each new year the media seems to focus on exercise, weight loss and lofty aspirations to make changes in our lives. It is the same theme year after year. I enjoyed the resolutions in the video, "I resolve to fix the leaky faucet, the broken doorknob, my neighbor's front step." Those were easier to attain than running a marathon. We begin each new year making promises to ourselves with the hope that this year will be different. This will be the year that I accomplish whatever goal I have resolved to keep. Making resolutions at the beginning of the year can be a blessing or a

disappointment. There have been a number of surveys done to see how well people keep their resolutions. One survey showed that 80% of those polled gave up on their resolution by February.¹

I'm wondering what might happen if our resolutions looked more like the last one in the video, "I resolve to do all I do for the glory of God"? That's not a resolution you're likely to see on the news. There's no magic diet or fitness plan for it, but there are some steps we can take to help us live for the glory of God. Jesus showed us one of those steps in today's Scripture reading from the gospel of Mark. It is a familiar story, Jesus went to see his cousin, John, who was teaching and baptizing followers in the Jordan river. John was surprised that Jesus asked to be baptized. "I need to be baptized by you." He said. But Jesus responded that it was proper for him to be baptized by John to fulfill all righteousness.

People have wondered what that means. Why did Jesus need to be baptized? He wasn't a sinner, so why did he need a baptism of repentance, which John proclaimed? Some say it was necessary to fulfill the prophecies about the Messiah. Some say he didn't get baptized for his sake, but to model for us what *we* are supposed to do. All of those things are true, but today I want to think about another reason why it was important for Jesus to be baptized. Baptism is a covenant – a sign and a seal of our relationship with God. Presbyterians speak of baptism as a sign of God's grace, and a seal of God's word to us. When I teach children about the Sacrament of Baptism, I describe it as a holy moment when promises are made. First, we remember the promises God makes to us, to always be with us, to forgive us and guide us. Second, in an infant baptism, parents and sponsors promise to be faithful to God and to nurture the child in the Christian faith. Third, the congregation promises to participate in nurturing the child's faith. If the person being baptized is old enough to make a profession of faith and promise to grow in faithfulness and commitment to following Jesus. Baptism is a visible expression of our covenant relationship with God.

We can be confident that Jesus didn't need to be baptized to show his commitment to God, or maybe he did. Not to show God that he was all in with the plan, but to show humanity that this is the covenant relationship he's committed to. Jesus' baptism was what we might call a seal, a way of

¹ <https://www.abccolumbia.com/2021/12/31/research-shows-80-of-people-abandon-their-new-years-resolutions-by-february/>

authenticating his identity as the Messiah and of affirming the commitment between he and God. The story says that when Jesus was baptized the Holy Spirit came upon him and a voice was heard saying, “this is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.” It was a revelation of Jesus’ identity.

But I think there is still more to this story. Jesus could have revealed his identity in any number of ways without undergoing baptism. He could turn water into wine, heal a blind man, raise the dead. Oh, he did those things didn’t he? So why was baptism so important? Perhaps it was because inherent in baptism is the recognition that this is a particular kind of covenant relationship. It comes with promises and requires promises in return.

There is a popular teaching used to describe prayer that that can help us as we think about the covenant of baptism. It speaks about the vertical and the horizontal aspects of prayer. The vertical prayer focuses on our direct relationship with God. Horizontal prayer focuses on others. Jesus understood that the covenant we make with God in baptism is both vertical and horizontal. While we receive the assurance of God’s promises, we respond with our promises to be faithful followers. While we receive the promises of the community of faith to nurture and support the baptized, we respond with promises to join in that work. God’s covenant relationship is both vertical and horizontal.

The Sacrament of Communion works the same way. At the Lord’s Table, we remember the teachings and sacrifice of Jesus that reveal who God is and what God has done for us. When we partake of the bread and wine, we respond to God’s grace and goodness with our gratitude and praise(vertical), and offer our lives in joyful service. (horizontal)

It’s the horizontal part that I want us to think about today. I often wonder if we make promises to God and then, like our new year’s resolutions, lose our motivation. We are great at saying, I do and I will, but we struggle when it comes to our willingness to do. Baptism calls us to repentance, faithfulness, and discipleship. At the Lord’s Table we are called to actively seek reconciliation in every instance of conflict or division between ourselves and our neighbors.” I wonder what would happen if we resolved to do these things for the glory of God without losing our motivation.

As Presbyterians, we take these promises very seriously. That is why we say that membership in the Church of Jesus Christ is both a joy and a privilege (vertical) and it is a commitment to participate in Christ's work in the world. (horizontal) You will find a handout in your bulletin that lines out the expectations of membership in a Presbyterian Church (USA) congregation.

A faithful member bears witness to God's love and grace in their actions, and promises to be involved responsibly in the ministry of Christ's church. Those promises include: proclaiming the good news in word and deed, taking part in the common life and worship of a congregation, lifting one another in prayer, mutual concern, and active support; studying Scripture and the issues of Christian faith and life, supporting the ministry of the church through the giving of money, time and talents, demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the church; responding to God's activity in the world through service to others; living responsibly in the personal, family, vocational, political, cultural and social relationships of life; working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment; caring for God's creation; participating in the governing responsibilities of the church, and reviewing and evaluating regularly the integrity of one's membership, and considering ways in which one's participation in the worship and service of the church may be increased and made more meaningful. Notice that this is not a list of options to pick and choose from, nor is it an exhaustive list. This list is the core of what it means to be a member of a PCUSA congregation.

There are promises we make when we ordain officers to serve in the church, both vertical and horizontal promises. We are asked, do we accept our new elders and deacons as chosen by God through the voice of the church to lead us in the way of Jesus Christ? Do we agree to pray for them, encourage them, and respect their decisions and follow as they guide us, serving Jesus Christ, who alone is Head of the Church? I've never heard anyone say no to these questions, but I have heard some rather ugly criticism over the years.

I brought these promises to your attention today because Jesus showed us that covenant agreements are important. One of his frustrations with his faith community was that their actions were not in line with their covenant relationship with God. Their horizontal and vertical were out of balance. I

suspect that Jesus might have similar concerns with the church today. We are good at claiming the promises from God, but not so good at carrying out the responsibilities that come with those promises. I wonder what the world would look like if every member of every congregation lived according to the promises they have made to God, to their church, and to each other? I wonder what it would look like if they all were resolved to do all that they do for the glory of God?

As we begin this new year, I encourage you to take the time to review and evaluate your participation in our congregation. Take a look at the list of things that membership includes and consider what you could do to live more fully into the covenant you've made with God and this congregation. There is certainly room for variety. How you participate in the life of the church is for you to discern, but I hope you will take the time to measure your participation to the list in your bulletin. Listen to your heart, for the Holy Spirit to encourage you and guide you.

I have been working in congregational ministry for 30+ years, and this I know. When members take their covenant with God and the church seriously, amazing things can happen. I have seen incredible energy and new ministries arise when members commit. I have also seen churches struggle. I have seen conflicts arise when leadership is not encouraged and respected or prayed for. I believe that if we all committed to the promises we make when we participate in the Sacraments and as members of the Church, we can make a significant impact toward the kingdom of God that Jesus intends and desires for us.

May the Holy Spirit come upon you all with the assurance that you are God's beloved child, and may your heart respond with the desire to do all that you do to the glory of God.

The Ministry of Members

Membership in the Church of Jesus Christ is a joy and a privilege. It is also a commitment to participate in Christ's mission. A faithful member bears witness to God's love and grace and promises to be involved responsibly in the ministry of Christ's Church. Such involvement includes:

- ♥ proclaiming the good news in word and deed
- ♥ taking part in the common life and worship of a congregation
- ♥ lifting one another in prayer, mutual concern, and active support
- ♥ studying Scripture and the issues of Christian faith and life
- ♥ supporting the ministry of the church through the giving of money, time, and talents, demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the church
- ♥ responding to God's activity in the world through service to others
- ♥ living responsible in the personal, family, vocational, political, cultural, and social relationships of life
- ♥ working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment
- ♥ caring for God's creation
- ♥ participating in the governing responsibilities of the church, and
- ♥ reviewing and evaluating regularly the integrity of one's membership, and considering ways in which one's participation in the worship and service of the church may be increased and made more meaningful.