

Lent 1 – March 1, 2009
Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ
Genesis 9:8-17 Mark 1:9-15

On Wednesday – Ash Wednesday – we entered this forty-day period that the Church calls Lent. It is a time for repentance, reflection, and for re-dedicating ourselves to living Christ-like lives as we prepare for the events of Holy Week: Palm Sunday and Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Maundy Thursday when we celebrate the Passover just as Jesus did with his disciples, the death of Jesus on Good Friday, our anxious anticipation during Easter Vigil, and finally the joyous day of Easter.

But it is good for us to dwell in this time of Lent and not rush too quickly toward Easter. The church year provides us this time every year to re-examine our lives, to “Repent,” because “the kingdom of God has come near”¹ in Jesus, as we continue to prepare for his coming again.

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Historically, the forty days of Lent was a time of catechetical instruction for those who would be baptized at Easter Vigil. This instruction would consist of teaching the person who seeks to join the Church all the basic things they would need to know to begin new lives as Christians.

Today, and on the coming four Sundays, we'll be making our Lenten journey with Jesus toward the cross by taking a closer look at five of God's covenants. In particular, we'll be looking at these covenants through the lens of baptism.

In the spirit of the early church, much of my message to you today and in the coming weeks will take the form of catechetical instruction. I often find it helpful for me to take a step back and go back to the basics. So, even if you are a life-long Lutheran, I hope you'll find something new, or a new way of looking at things, in these sermons as we journey together in the coming weeks.

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In the spirit of going back to the basics, before we begin five weeks of looking at God's covenants to humanity, it might be helpful for us to define what a covenant is. It's sort of like a contract. You've probably heard this word, "covenant," but it's not one we use very frequently. In short, a covenant is an agreement between two parties. Promises are made. Sometimes there are conditions that have to be met in order for that covenant to be fulfilled. Sometimes there are no conditions, just promise.

If you've lived in any sort of a homeowners' association, you're probably familiar with covenants. HOAs have a usually voluminous set of rules that they call "covenants," and they expect all people who live in that area to abide by this set of rules.

This sort of covenant might be likened to the Ten Commandments, a set of rules that people are supposed to live by. We would call this a "covenant of human obligation": God gives the set of rules, and there are certain things that we people are supposed to do in order to fulfill our part of the covenant. This is also a conditional covenant. But I get ahead of myself... We'll be looking at this sort of covenant in a couple of weeks when we talk about the Ten Commandments.

Today, however, we have a different sort of covenant. We begin by looking at the story of Noah and the flood. You probably remember the story. It begins with the people building a tower, a tower so high they would reach into Heaven and be like God. The Tower of Babel. God punished the people for attempting to be like God. The punishment was the flood.

But God saw that there was yet on earth one man who was good, Noah. So God chose to save him and preserve humanity by telling Noah to build a boat, the ark. God also chose to preserve the animals by telling Noah to take two of every kind of animal with him on the ark.

Then God send the rains. Rain, rain and more rain, until the entire earth was flooded. Finally, the rain stopped, and the waters drained away until the ark was left on dry ground. When Noah and his family left the ark, the worshiped God.

Then God made his promise with Noah, his covenant, and with all of creation. God promised that He would never again destroy the earth with water. This was a one-way covenant from God, pure promise with no conditions attached, a covenant of divine commitment. And as a sign of that covenant, God placed a rainbow in the sky. The rainbow is not so much a sign of God's covenant for *us* – it is a sign of the covenant to *God*, a reminder to God of the promise made. And when we see a rainbow, we, too, can remember the promise that God made.

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So then we fast-forward to today's Gospel reading from Mark, the story of Jesus' baptism. This is the very same text you heard on January 11th when Pastor Kiesling was here and you celebrated The Baptism of our Lord.

But today, as we tie together God's covenant with Noah and baptism, it might be helpful for us to take a step back and talk about what baptism is. We call baptism a sacrament – one of the two sacraments in the Lutheran church, along with Holy Communion. When we have the promise of God, the word together with a physical object – water, wine and bread – that is a sacrament.

We call these things sacraments, but they are also covenants. They are covenants of divine obligation, just like God's promise to Noah. There is nothing we need to do in order to receive them. They are pure gift. All we need to do is make ourselves available and willing, to reach out our hands and take them, from God who graciously offers these promises to us.

The promise to us in baptism is to be cleansed from the stain of original sin, to be claimed as a child of God, receive the sign of the cross, and be endowed with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Pure gift, all of this. There is nothing we need to do to be made worthy to receive them. Indeed, there is nothing we *can* do to be made worthy to receive them. Pure gift, from God to us.

In our baptismal liturgy we remember the promises of God to His people in history. In particular, we say, "Through the waters of the flood you delivered Noah and his family."²

When we remember God's faithfulness to His covenant promises throughout history, we receive the assurance that God will be faithful to His promises to us, too. Any time we begin to doubt our own salvation, we can, like Martin Luther, point to our baptism and declare, "I am baptized!" to receive assurance of God's faithfulness to us.

But let us stop to ponder a few things about Jesus' baptism. The biggest question, at least for me, is: Did Jesus need to be baptized? Did he need to be baptized for the same reasons as us? The answer to that is a resounding, "No!"

Jesus is the only person ever born without sin. He did not bear the stain of original sin which needed to be washed away.

By the same token, Jesus didn't need to be claimed as a child of God. Jesus already was and *is* God! We proclaim this faith in our Nicene Creed when we say:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,

The only Son of God,

Eternally begotten of the Father,

God from God, Light from Light,

True God from true God,

Begotten, not made,

Of one being with the Father.

Similarly, Jesus didn't need to receive the Holy Spirit which we all receive in baptism. Jesus was and *is* the Holy Spirit! Again, the words of the Nicene Creed:

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,

Who proceeds from the Father and the Son,

Who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified.

So if Jesus did not have original sin, if Jesus didn't need to be claimed as a child of God because he is God, and if Jesus didn't need to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit because he is the Holy Spirit, then what was the purpose of Jesus' baptism?

I think Jesus' baptism is for us a sign, like Noah's rainbow. We can point to his baptism as a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy of the one who would come to bring salvation to the world.

And, in his baptism, Jesus places himself firmly in solidarity with the human race. God came and experienced the fullness of being human, with all its joy *and* its suffering. He is neither above us or below us – Jesus *is* one of us. Man, yet so much more. Jesus comes, not to be the conquering messiah long-awaited, but to be the servant of all, even to death on a cross.

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In the Reformation, the use of the crucifix fell out of favor with the Reformed churches. Rather than a cross with a battered and dying Jesus hanging on it, we use the empty cross to signify that Jesus no longer hangs on the cross but has risen from the dead and reigns in Heaven as triumphant Lord of all. The empty cross, for us, is a sign of God's promise that we, too, shall rise from the dead and live life eternally with God.

Yet I wonder... I wonder if it might be a good idea for us to occasionally meditate on the crucifix, on Christ crucified? Do we rush too quickly from Good Friday to Easter morning, so as to avoid all the ugliness of Jesus' painful death? And in doing so, do we pay proper attention to the sacrifice that he made, in standing in solidarity with all of humanity, and all that meant?

I'm going to make a shocking proposal to you. I propose that perhaps that vision of Jesus hanging on the cross can be for us another sign, like Noah's rainbow. It's a sign of another of God's covenant promises to us. It's a sign that Jesus is truly with us, even here and now, standing in solidarity with us through all the joys and sorrows of being human.

The use of the crucifix is so far outside my tradition that it's hard for me to imagine, but perhaps this is how Roman Catholics view the crucifix. Rather than an ugly reminder of Jesus' suffering and horrible death, perhaps for them it is a thing which also conveys beauty. Its beauty is certainly not in its outward appearance, but in the reminder that Christ stands with us, through the waters of baptism, throughout all of life, and all the way into life eternal. And *that* is a beautiful thing.

Amen.

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¹ Mark 1:15

² Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), p. 230