

The Baptism of our Lord 2021 / Keep the Covenant

They first arrived in the world 500 years after Jesus walked the earth. They are there by design, on purpose. Their purpose is this: to collect everything together.

I'm speaking about The Collect of the Day. It is a prayer that we find in many liturgical Churches, Churches with a structured worship service. Every Sunday, we in The Episcopal Church share in a Collect of the Day; and this prayer collects together the meaning of the readings for that day, or the meaning of a holy day or Church season. The rubrics, or rules of The Prayer Book, say that the priest reads the Collect of the Day. Some parishes choose to have the whole congregation read it together, to get folks to really pay attention to it.

Today is The First Sunday after The Epiphany, also known as The Baptism of our Lord. Here is the Collect of the Day for this Sunday, which we all just shared:

Father in heaven, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting.

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Why am I highlighting The Collect of the Day? Because, when the world loses its mind, as we witnessed this past week in our nation's capitol, Christian people need to remember who we are. When the world loses its mind, we need to remember who we are.

Who are we? As The Collect of the Day reminds us, we are baptized people.

"Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made", we pray. Baptized people are people who have made a *covenant*. A covenant is entering a lifelong relationship; and that relationship involves promises. Just as a couple enters into a marriage covenant with each other, baptized people enter into a covenant with God: a lifelong relationship, with promises.

What did we promise? What exactly does The Collect of the Day hope that God will grant us the ability to keep? Here's a quick review of some Baptismal promises made by adults for themselves, or on behalf of children:

- *Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent, and return to the Lord?* We answer: I will, with God's help.
- *Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?* I will, with God's help.
- *Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?* I will, with God's help.
- *Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?* I will, with God's help.

These promises are part of what The Episcopal Church says it means to call Jesus "our Lord and Savior".

So – all baptized Christians share a covenant with God, a lifelong relationship, with promises. It's what makes all of us, different as we are from each other, part of the same family. It's why churches dare to use the word *family* to describe themselves.

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The world, or part of it, has lost its mind recently. Rioters, at the encouragement of our president, occupied the Capitol Building. They forced their way into that sacred space, caused it to be evacuated, attacked police, and destroyed property. This mob gathered to overthrow the results of the last presidential election. Their *purpose* was to block the peaceful transfer of power in the America; and in their own words, they said they were there because the president told them to do this. This happened, in real life, in America, in 2021. How are we, as Christian people in America, to respond? I believe that, when the world loses its mind, we need to remember who we are. And so: Let us briefly reflect on how our Baptismal promises guide us in remembering who we are.

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent, and return to the Lord? I will, with God's help.

What does it mean to resist evil? In The Bible, it means naming the opposite of goodness, of love; and then, as we can, doing something about it. Another way to say this is to prophesy – because that's exactly what the ancient prophets did: they named it when the people were acting in evil ways; and they called them to change their ways.

Is it good, is it loving, what we witnessed last week? No. Love does not call us to demonize others with words, to threaten others, to act in violence toward others. The storming of the Capitol Building was hateful and dangerous; and tragically, it was founded on an absolute lie.

What does it mean to repent and return to the Lord? It means two things: Admit we messed up; and take steps to change. We may not support what happened at the Capitol Building; but if we remain quiet about it, we are in some way complicit, because to say nothing is to say something. In The Prayer Book, we confess to God for “things done and left undone”.

Notice what happened in our sacred stories today. The baptism to which John the Baptist invited people is called “a baptism of repentance”. We are brought into a community of faith which invites us to repent: to admit it when we mess up; and to take steps to change. And notice what happens to those first Christians in Ephesus who are baptized in Jesus’ name: they immediately start prophesying: they name what is good and what is evil, and invite others to change along with them.

As baptized people, we are called to resist evil; and we are called to repent.

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Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

I will, with God's help.

What does it mean to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ by word and example?

Well, *proclaim* means to “announce”, or “shout out”. It’s like at a wedding, when the Master of Ceremonies calls for everyone to be quiet, and says: “Ladies and Gentlemen – Introducing, for the first time, Mr. and Mrs. Smith!” When something is proclaimed, it is noticed. And so, we promise to make the Good News of God in Christ noticeable. We promise to help people see that we are loved and here to love each other.

Now, there’s a saying: Actions speak louder than words. People believe our words if they see that we practice what we preach. As St. Francis said it: “Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.” Our example will always preach louder than our words.

How do we preach Good News in light of the storming of the Capitol Building?

Well, notice what we discover in our Gospel reading today: “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” How did John “proclaim”, or make known, Good News about Jesus? He was willing to stand out from the crowd, to be noticed. Listen to this: “Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.” John the Baptist stood out from the crowd first, by choosing to live in the wilderness, to distinguish himself from others; second, by dressing quite differently from your average Jew; and third, by daring to call people to change their ways. John the Baptist knew that, if we’re going to follow Jesus, we’re going to stand out from the crowd, we’re going to be noticed.

What happened when John the Baptist proclaimed his faith not just in word but also by example? Here's what we read: "And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." People saw that John the Baptist was the real deal, and they were drawn to him. What does that mean for us, as baptized people? Perhaps the world needs an example of people not demonizing those who disagree with them; people advocating peace rather than violence; people who love God with their mind, fact-checking information so they don't fall for lies and conspiracy theories. The way we speak and act in response to the attack on our democracy is a proclamation, one way or the other.

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Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? I will, with God's help.

What does it mean to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to love your neighbor as yourself? It means that maybe it's true, this crazy idea that we are all made in God's image, that we all have a "divine spark" within us. Sure, now and then, we may struggle to see Christ in others; certainly others will struggle at times to see Christ in us. To seek and serve Christ in others means that we believe that God can use them for good things. As one person put it: "While it's true that every saint has a past, it's also true that every sinner has a future." This doesn't mean that people should not be held accountable for sin; but it does mean that God can do good things, even in the lives of those in whom we cannot find any divine spark.

In this sense, it's important to point out where Paul was as we read about him today. He was in Ephesus, in what is modern-day Turkey. He was sharing his faith with Gentiles, non-Jews. The Early Church had a huge fight about this: there were some who were convinced that Jesus came only for the Jews, and there was no room in their new faith community for Gentiles. What was the point in even talking to such faithless people? But Paul had a conversion experience which led him to believe that God wanted him to preach to the Gentiles. Paul believed that Christ could be found even outside of Judaism.

What might this mean for us? Maybe it means that, even if we find ourselves cursing those who attacked our democracy, or cursing elected officials who fan the flames of insurrection, that we also pray for them. Maybe it means that, when a friend or family members says something about these events that makes us want to scream, we say, instead, "Tell me more. I don't understand." Trust me when I say this is difficult, and painful, for me. But part of what it means to call Jesus Lord and Savior is to seek and serve Christ in all persons.

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Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being? I will, with God's help.

What does it mean to strive for justice and peace, to respect others' dignity? Well to *strive* means to struggle, to work hard, literally to be willing to "put up with strife" for some cause. If we strive for justice and peace, we will make some people angry – most often, people in power. Jesus, whom at his baptism God called "Beloved" and said that he was "well pleased" with him – that same Jesus called the powerful in Jewish society to change their ways, to bring about the Kingdom of God, a world of justice and peace. No one was angrier with Jesus than those in power. Sometimes *we* may be angry with Jesus, because *we* are the ones giving up some power so that the world may be more just.

What does this mean for us as baptized people? Surely a world of justice and peace does not involve an aggressive mob, chasing a fantasy, crashing into our halls of government. Surely the one we call Lord and Savior would not lead that mob. We then, as his followers, cannot support such behavior. We cannot follow Jesus, and at the same time, support rioting and destruction.

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The Collect of the Day seeks to "collect" the meaning of our sacred readings on Sunday. Today, we prayed these words:

Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made.

Baptized people are people who have made a *covenant*. A covenant is entering a lifelong relationship; and that relationship involves promises.

You and I made these promises, or had these promises made on our behalf:

- *Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent, and return to the Lord?* I will, with God's help.
- *Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?* I will, with God's help.
- *Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?* I will, with God's help.
- *Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?* I will, with God's help.

Of all the images at the Capitol Building that I've seen over the past few days, one stands out for me: It's a woman holding a large sign that reads: "Jesus Saves." She's carrying the sign upside-down.

When the world loses its mind, we need to remember who we are. Amen.