

I love the story of Jesus' baptism because it is inspiring, so physical and deeply spiritual at the same time. Baptism is a key part of our faith practices and rituals of the sacraments, of course, but oftentimes we get overwhelmed thinking about the liturgy and the promises of baptism too. I pray that as we remember Jesus' baptism today, we will hear the story in a new way, connecting us to the calling of the life of faith, rooted in the promises of God. We will hear these promises as we celebrate this sacrament today too, baptizing Jack, our dear brother in Christ. May they nourish, encourage, and refresh you to live out the promises of God on which we base our faith and life.

When we really look into it, there are three promises made in baptism. The first is God's promise, the second is the promise the parents and sponsors make to the person being baptized, and the third is the promise the community makes. Each of these three promises has its roots in this original baptism story, and we have the gift of being able to uphold such a beautiful and sacred ritual.

God's promises to us in baptism are rooted in God's unending and creative love for us. Just as God so creatively descended like a dove in our baptism Gospel today, the Holy Spirit is promised to be our Advocate, to empower us and all of creation out of God's love for us. In baptism, God promises us a new birth in living hope, to deliver us from sin and death and raise us to new life in Christ Jesus. The water is a symbol of this deliverance from death to life - our old selves, our sins, the fear and death that threatens to hold us captive is washed away and drowned in the waters, so that we are free to live in the new life promised by God through Jesus Christ in his own sin and death.

The second promises in our baptism liturgy are the promises the parents and sponsors make. These are rooted in caring deeply for this person and raising them up in the life of faith. In our Gospel text today, John fills this role for Jesus - it is understood that they are related through their mothers (Elizabeth is John's mother, and also Mary's cousin, perhaps a couple degrees removed). And not only that, but they have love for one another

and hold each other in high esteem. John, of course, has been proclaiming Jesus' arrival in Galilee for a while now. We read John's words "the one who comes after me will baptize you with fire and the Holy Spirit" during Advent, as part of the proclamation of Jesus' coming into the world.

In our story today, though, John is astounded that Jesus would entrust him to baptize him. He holds Jesus in such high esteem that he insists it should be the other way - John initially would have prevented baptizing Jesus. But ultimately they know there are greater things at work - the God-given prophecies surrounding Jesus, his life, and who he is, and John baptizes Jesus.

The promises families and sponsors make to a child in baptism are also indicative of things much greater than just the moment we are in. The promises are rooted in providing concrete ways for the child to live out their faith and learn about the Christian tradition in which we are called, teaching them the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, 10 Commandments, and above all, proclaiming Christ in word and deed, caring for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace. We certainly cannot do this important and beautiful work alone, so it is truly a gift that in baptism we have people around us who promise to come alongside and empower us, through the gift of the Holy Spirit on these holy endeavors.

And as an extension of these holy endeavors, the third promises come from the larger congregation, the wider community surrounding the baptized person. As we think about the third promise, beloved community, we look at the prophecy that Jesus mentions. His baptism fulfills these foretold words, that Jesus has come for the righteousness of all people, the forgiveness of sin for all humans. In this baptism and in these words of prophecy, Jesus and John are connected to the thousands of generations of people before and after them. The thousands of generations who prayed and lived in hopeful faith for the coming of the Messiah, and the thousands of generations now, including us, whose lives are full of grace, mercy, and truth, because of Jesus' life, death, and new life again.

We are connected, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to the whole body of Christ, all the faithful people with whom we share so much. The congregation as a whole is really standing in for this whole worldwide body of Christ, as we welcome newly baptized folks into this body. The response is welcoming in, to the mission we share, in giving praise to God, and sharing God's creative and redeeming word to all the world. Praise be to God for these holy promises.

The baptism of Jesus is the starting point for his public ministry, the starting point before which he created his community of followers, the earliest Christians. Before that time, Jesus had lived largely as a regular person did in that region of the ancient world - likely learning the carpentry trade from his father, being involved in the community, and doing what he needed to do to help his family and community thrive. But something happened, something fundamental changed when Jesus was baptized by John. Of course, we have the physical changes and phenomena outlined in this story - the Holy Spirit descending like a dove and the voice of God calling Jesus his beloved son, with whom he is well pleased. But on an even deeper level, on a spiritual, calling sort of level, Jesus was changed. He began the work God called him to, of loving God and loving his neighbors in all he did, providing all people with actions and healings and teachings and ministry that would support them in all of life's ups and downs. Jesus' baptism was the beginning of his public calling to the people and to God, living into the promises of God and ministering in whole new ways.

I often get the question of why we baptize our beloved siblings in Christ when they are infants, or small children, when Jesus was baptized as an adult. And the answer to that question is rooted in this calling to public ministry that Jesus began. The promises of baptism are for us throughout our lives, given graciously and powerfully by God, who creates and sustains us. Our baptism is the beginning of our lives of ministry too, that no matter how old or where we are in life, God is still working through us to minister to our fellow people, and loving God above all else. And the promises of God are for us, always. Nothing we do will ever, ever separate us from God's great love, grace, and mercy. When we are babies, we

haven't really done anything other than exist as a beautiful and beloved child of God. And this affirms these promises - that even before we can really do anything or develop in certain ways, God loves us. God calls us to a life of love. God assures us of his constant presence by the Holy Spirit. God gives us a purpose and a calling to love our neighbors in thought, word, and deed, and shine our light before others so we may glorify our father in heaven. God's promises of love are for us, always.

These three baptismal promises are powerful, and lay the groundwork for three of the most important and beneficial ways we exist in the world. We are first and foremost God's beloved child. We are then surrounded by our nearest and dearest, our family and close friends. And we are part of a larger community, the whole world, the whole body of Christ, joined together by our humanity, of which we are one important part. As this body of Christ, we are compelled to love God and one another in all we do, by the strength given to us by God in the promises of baptism.

And as we remember our baptism and the baptism of our Lord Jesus today, let's encourage one another in this great body of Christ, to live this life of public ministry. We are called to live in love, to work for justice and peace, to let our lights so shine before others so that we may glorify God in heaven. Let us live in the ways we promise, rooted in God's promises, supporting each other through the highs and lows of our life of faith, and praise and worship our God of great love and new creation each day. Thanks be to God, Amen.