

This Is the Sign of the Covenant

In the name of him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, dear friends in Christ: Last week in our time together we heard how the Lord has a construction project underway. He's building a holy temple that we call the Church. We saw that though we are saved as individuals by hearing the Word and through it acquiring a personal trust in Jesus, it's not the Lord's plan to leave us as individuals in isolation from each other. No, the Lord is a God of relationships. Having united us to himself through Jesus, it's his desire to join us also to one another in perfect harmony and fellowship—one big happy family of God. St. Paul pictured it for us as a grand building, the foundation of which is the teachings of the prophets and apostles, and Jesus Christ is the head and cornerstone—the one that determines plumb and square for all the others. And we are the individual stones in the wall; each one having been carefully shaped and cut by the Lord for the place that he has for us. Each one of us, then, playing a part in the overall integrity of the structure. Each one depending upon and at the same time supporting the others. It's a beautiful picture.

And now seeing the Church of Christ as one great temple, the question before us today is what's the entry point? Where's the door? The Lord is building this grand cathedral of faith; how does one become a part of it? Or, more to the point, how can any one of us know for sure that *we are* a part of it? How do you know that the Word and promises of God in Christ – that the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation that come through Jesus – that they really apply to *you*?

The answer to all of these questions is, in a word, Baptism. Now unfortunately it's true that a lot of Christians don't see Baptism this way – particularly those who are in the vast majority of Protestant and so-called nondenominational churches. And that's really sad for them because by not seeing it that way, they're missing (I'd say depriving themselves of) one of the major recurrent and very comforting themes of the Holy Scriptures, which is that God consistently deals with his creatures in a baptismal sort of way. This is especially true at the beginning of every relationship between God and what he's made.

We see it from the very first. Consider the first three verses of the Bible. God creates the earth. It's formless, chaotic, dark, and devoid of life. Then we're told that the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the deep waters. That's interesting: God, whom we know is everywhere present, first locates himself in a "Here I am where you can find me" sort of way right over the water that covers the dark and messy creation. And then God speaks. "Let there be light"—and boom, the light comes on. The earth is no longer in the dark. So, you've got water, word, and the Spirit's immanent presence – and the result is the illumination of the creation. Sounds like Baptism, doesn't it? And if we properly assume that it is God the Father who is the one who speaks, and we understand that the Word he speaks is the Son, the second person of the Trinity, since the Word of God is one of his names, then we see that we have all three persons of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit accounted for in this baptismal moment. Take it a step further: because the Word the Father speaks is "Let there be light" – and Christ *is* the Light of the world – we see that in this Baptism what the creation is being bathed in is the Light of Christ. He is what's going to make it possible for the creation to see, to understand, and to know the Lord God and to enable it respond to what he is doing. From the very beginning then, we see that when God wants to introduce himself to his creation and start to work on it, he does it in a baptismal way.

We see the same thing every time an infant is baptized. Having been born in sin and under its curse, the child is in a spiritual sense dark, chaotic, and dead. But God in his mercy has given his church the sacrament and sign of Baptism. The Spirit hovers over the water, the name of the Triune God is invoked, the Word is spoken—and boom, the Light of Christ illumines the receiver. The relationship begins. The infant is made a child of God and an heir to all his promises in Christ Jesus.

Of course someone might protest, “How can that be? The child is too young to understand any of that!” But that is precisely the point. No one born in sin is able to understand the things of God. They’re dead. They can only be the receiver of God’s gift. *He* must turn the light on. And he shows us that through Baptism he does. That we baptize infants only emphasizes God’s grace that much more. And every time we witness a Baptism, it reminds us all of the grace of God that we also received – and indeed, that we continue to receive.

And just in case we missed it the first time around when reading Genesis chapter one, we get it again in Genesis chapters six through nine, in which we have the story of the flood – the very end of which is today’s Old Testament lesson. Remember what happened. The world fell into sin. And as people began to spread over the face of the earth, it only got worse. The Lord looks down and sees that the creation he made so well has gone completely bad. Evaluating the condition of every person, the Lord passes this judgment: “Every inclination of his heart is only evil all the time.” That’s a pretty sad indictment; but it’s important to see that it’s true of all people. The Lord sees no goodness in the world. All people are corrupt. They are in a spiritual sense completely dark, chaotic, and devoid of life. So he starts over. Last time the earth was this messed up, it was under water. He decides to put it there again.

And yet God in his grace and mercy decides to save. His eye falls on a man named Noah. He says, “I’ll be gracious to this man and his family. I’ll tell him what I’m about to do. I’ll reveal to him my plan of salvation.” So, Noah, having been illumined with God’s plan, gets busy building the Ark – another of the Lord’s grand construction projects. Interestingly enough, Noah builds it according to God’s precise instructions – which reminds us how the church is built according to God’s Word. Do you suppose there’s a connection? I think so; but it’s even more necessary for us to see that the Ark is the Christ figure in the story. I mean, think about this huge boat under construction. It takes Noah and his sons 120 years to get the job done. Picture it in your mind, if you will. And for most of that time understand that what you’ve got is this massive frame: the huge keel laid down as its backbone from which the cross timbers spread out at ninety degrees like ... well, like a giant ribcage.

Seeing it that way, what we’ve got going on here is a kind of reversal of the story of the creation of the woman. I know I’m jumping around here; but bear with me – it’s worth it. Remember the story: The Lord wants to create a bride for the man. So, what does he do? He puts the man into a very deep sleep. He opens his side and takes stuff out (the Hebrew doesn’t actually say a rib). And from what he has removed from the man, the Lord creates a bride for him. He brings her to him and the two become one. And they’re happy together.

Fast forward to the New Testament: the Lord wants to create a bride for *the Man* – speaking of the Lord Jesus Christ and his bride the Church. What does he do? He puts the man into a deep sleep—the deepest sleep of all, his death on the cross. The Spirit is released; so we know where he is. And then he opens his side from which flows water and blood. He takes the water and blood and fashions a bride for him: water to give her birth in Baptism, blood to give her life in Holy Communion. He brings the bride to the now awakened man and the two become one. And they’re happy together. Wonderful picture, isn’t it?

Okay, now back to Noah and his family. The judgment of God is about to descend upon the earth in the form of water. Noah and all that will be saved now enter into the side of the Ark. You might even say that they are at the heart of the Christ figure in the story. And then the wrath of God falls in the form of the flood. The Ark, that is, *Christ*, takes the punishment. He is lifted up from the earth. He endures the storm. The timbers groan and creak under the incredible stresses. Again, it's a picture of the anguish of Jesus on the cross bearing the weight of the world's sin and suffering the punishment we deserve. But meanwhile all those who are within him – who entered into him by Baptism – ride out the storm of God's wrath and judgment in perfect safety.

And then the storm is passed. After more than a year the waters recede. The Ark lies in the mud like a body that's dead. Its mission is complete. "It is finished." Its side is opened up and out comes the new creation – the ones God by his grace has chosen to save. They are the inheritors of a new world, cleansed of the sin and evil that brought God's judgment upon the old creation.

And the Lord says to Noah, "I'm going to make you a promise that I don't want you ever to forget. Never again will I bring my judgment upon the earth by a flood like this. And to seal the deal, I'm giving you a sign. I'm placing my rainbow in the clouds as a reminder for you and for me. I'll see it, and remember my everlasting covenant to save." And isn't it interesting that a rainbow is the result of *light* passing through *water*?

Spirit, water, Word, light: Baptism. The sign of the covenant God gives us today. The sign that unites us to Christ. The sign by which he touches and heals us. The sign that puts us in his passion, death, and resurrection. The sign that washes away our sin, gives us new life, and makes us heirs of the new creation. The sign that makes us part of the bride of Christ, his Church.

And, of course, it's a sign that is something to look at and so be reminded of the promise. But it's important to understand what promise it is we're supposed to be reminded of. We have to read the sign correctly. For example, like many of you I wear a wedding ring. It too is a sign of a promise. It tells the world that I'm a married man (doubtless to the despair of single women the world over—or maybe not; but it does sort of freak people out when I call visit a member who's a patient in a Catholic hospital. Everybody in the hall calls me "Father", and then they notice the ring which leaves them scratching their heads). But anyway, in talking to people, I've found that many make the mistake of thinking that a wedding ring is a reminder of the promise the one wearing it made. That's why people who are being unfaithful often take their rings off – they don't want to be reminded of the promise they made while they're breaking it. But if you remember the context in which the ring is given, it says nothing about the promise made by the wearer. If you wear a ring, it was given to you by your spouse. It's the sign of the promise he or she made to you. If someone is going to be unfaithful, what they really ought to do is ask for the ring they gave back. That's the one that stands for the promise being broken.

But this is what many people don't understand about Baptism. They think it has to do with a promise that we make to God. They think it's a sign of our faithfulness and obedience to him. It's nothing of the sort – which is a good thing because the fact is that we aren't faithful or obedient to him. We break our promises to him all the time. So if Baptism has to do with any promise we might make, it's utterly worthless. But we didn't invent Baptism. God gave it to us as the sign of the promise he makes to us in his Son. It's the sign of his faithfulness, which means it's rock solid because he cannot lie or be unfaithful. And like a wedding ring, we *wear*

our Baptisms. It's not a onetime thing that you do and are done with. We don't say, "I was baptized". Rather, we say, "I *am* baptized. I have put on Christ." This is why many Christians make the sign of the cross when the name of the Triune God is invoked. It's an ongoing reminder that in Baptism the cross of Christ was applied to me and that I continue to live in him under the sign of his cross. And that's vital because we need every moment of every day the forgiveness of sin that Christ achieved for us.

So let's wear the sign boldly. And let's appreciate what it means and find assurance in the promises that God makes to us in and through Baptism, so that daily dying to sin through repentance and casting the burden and guilt of our sins on Jesus our Savior, we may be raised up with him and walk in newness of life now in time and forever with him in glory. In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!