

## “Promises, Promises”

Today is Baptism of the Lord Sunday. It is the day we set aside to remember when John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River. If you go with us to the Holy Land in June, you will have a chance to renew your baptism in the same waters as Jesus Christ. Having done this once, I cannot tell you how moving it is. But the story for the day always begs the question, “Why would Jesus Christ, who had no sin, need to be baptized?”

Even John the Baptist himself questioned Jesus as to why HE needed to participate in this act and Jesus told him it was to fulfill righteousness. Then, after his baptism, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus and recognized him as the Son of God. This, in a way, was to bless Jesus with the Holy Spirit as a way of initiating his ministry, which of course, led to the cross.

But I also believe that God knew that we all find it easier to share our innermost thoughts, fears, desires and feelings with someone that we feel we can relate to. That is *why* the Word became flesh. From the very beginning, it was God’s desire that Jesus would be able to relate to us on every level. So he came to us in the most vulnerable state possible – as a baby.

In his baptism, God continued the tradition of having Jesus participate in every aspect of human living. Or perhaps I should say, every aspect of FAITHFUL living. On the way to purchase our salvation with his blood, Jesus was sure to set an example for us as to what faithful living looks like. Through his teaching, preaching, healing and every-day life we learn that faithful living means sharing love, compassion, forgiveness and service in every way.

We might even say that his baptism is one more way the Jesus saw as an opportunity to build community. After all, when we baptize today, WE do not have the power to send the Holy

Spirit on each other. That power is left only to God. So, when we participate in baptism, it is a symbolic reminder that we have been claimed as member of the household of God. We are a part of a community. And as God's children, we are heirs to the promises. And that's what I would like us to think about today. In fact, it is what I want to emphasize from the passage in Acts. Promises.

Let's talk about some of God's promises first. There are too many found in Scripture to name in one sermon but here are a few: I will make of you a great nation. I will bless you so that you will be a blessing to others. I will be your God and you will be my people. I have called you by name. You are mine. However, the most powerful, the most useful and maybe even the one we rely on most often is, "Do not be afraid for I am with you." Indeed, all who have claimed God as their Maker, Jesus as their Savior and the Holy Spirit as their guide and advocate can claim these promises every day.

But when we take the symbolic step into the waters of baptism, either for ourselves or for our children, we are ALSO making promises. We are promising that we are putting on a new life. Life marked by the forgiveness of sins. And this new life has a certain look which became evident to Peter in the story in Acts that precedes the one we heard today.

Peter was told by God in a vision to go to home of Cornelius in Caesarea and eat with him. Now there were two problems with this vision. First, Cornelius was a Gentile. Jewish law prohibited Jews from going into the home of Gentiles, who were considered unclean. But even more alarming that ate food that was unclean – pork, birds of prey and catfish, to name a few.

But Peter did as he was instructed and learned from God the lesson we heard today. "God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to God." This was Peter's final missionary sermon in Acts and paves the way for

Paul's work with the Gentiles. But it helps you and me understand that God's promises are for anyone who loves and follows God.

This is part and parcel of the promises that are made at a person's baptism. To help ANYONE who is interested in following God understand the promises made by God to us and the ways that we can respond with our own promises as we live and serve the living God.

So now I would like us to focus on some *specific* promises that we make as part of our partnership in ministry with God. In just a few minutes, the men and women that this congregation has elected and that the Holy Spirit has called to lead the body of Christ at Nazareth in the next few years will make some promises, too. They have studied and been preparing so that they could answer them with integrity. I will not go over each of them now, but my favorite is this: "Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?"

These promises are not just words. They are part of the covenant that each of these brothers and sisters in Christ have felt led to demonstrate. But that doesn't mean that the rest of us are off the hook! You see, we make promises as disciples of Christ in OUR ministry too.

They may not be as formally noted but here are some of the promises you and I are called to fulfill. When you join this church, you are asked something along these lines: "Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?" "Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love?" "Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?"

Now let's see how each one of us might flesh these promises out in our everyday lives as disciples at Nazareth. Those of you who read the Meeting House News this month, which is our

church newsletter, may remember seeing that the Session has named 2020 “The Year of the Child”. This is actually the beginning of a process that will probably not be fully operational for at least two years but has been brewing in our “think-tank” for almost four years! Presbyterians ARE notoriously slow!

When I first came to Nazareth as the Interim Pastor, I asked the Session “What is Nazareth specifically ‘known’ for?” Across the board, the answer was “our history”. What a great answer! We are blessed to have a rich heritage of faith, leadership, beauty and integrity to lean on. Almost everywhere I go, at least in the Upstate and sometimes farther, when someone finds out I am the pastor here, they tell me they have a relative in our cemetery.

But this church also has demonstrated a wisdom that cherishes our past but seeks to grow into the future. So I persisted by asking what we are known for in the present. For example, Tyger River is easily associated with The Carpenter’s Table and Second Presbyterian with the Soup Kitchen. For many years, Mobile Meals was housed out of First Presbyterian. But what about Nazareth?

The wheels in the room began turning in people’s minds and I started hearing the words welcoming, friendly, open to all. This is a page right out of Peter’s sermon. And then we started talking about our children. The hope for our future. And since we have had an increase in our membership of young families with children in the past few years, I asked, “What if Nazareth became known as the church where they REALLY love, focus on, our children. And the idea of the “Year of the Child” was born.

So I want to remind everyone here of a few more promises that you have made since I have been here and actually for almost 250 years. They are the promises you make when you participate in a baptism at our church. And just to make it a little more personal, I would like the

following people or their parents to stand for just a moment. Darcy and Derek Schall. Ginny and Rock Friday. Ean Kern. Tina Cantrell. Bailey Segrest. John Henry Yarborough. Peyton Allen. Abby Reynolds.

These are the people or parents of children who have been baptized in the four years since I have been here. And here is what YOU were asked at the time. Do you, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, promise to guide and nurture Abby or Ean by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging them to know and follow Christ and to be faithful members of his church?

Now, as I recall, these were answered in the affirmative and they were answered unanimously. Therefore, it is the responsibility of every person here to help each other know and follow Christ. And that is where the “Year of the Child” is going to start.

Jesus’ baptism and Peter’s sermon that we heard today are about giving up the old life and putting on the new. Now, I don’t know about you all but I have to do this every day! I did not become perfect at my baptism at the age of 12, nor when I was ordained as an Elder when I was 28 or when I was Ordain as a minister at the age of 40. I have to work at it every day! The new life does not come easily to me.

But thanks be to God that we don’t have to take the journey alone. It is a community affair. When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River and when Peter went into the home of Cornelius and realized that every person we meet is created in God’s image, they were increasing the community of the heirs to the promise.

And friends, that is our call today. Not just when we ooh and aah at the baby at the baptismal font or the teenager or adult whose faith calls them to take this beautiful step. Not just when we agree to a specific position of service and honor as we become Elders or answer the call

to Youth ministry or to teach Sunday School or to mentor a Confirmand or lead a Circle. As heirs of the promises of salvation by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are called to say “YES” to the promises that God offers us by sharing them with others.

So as we move through this work in progress called the “Year of the Child”, I pray that each one here will seek to honor the promises that you have made at one time or another to guide someone else in the journey we call discipleship. It may simply be through prayer for each other. It may be through something that seems very small but is actually vital to success of our mission to glorify God and make disciples for Christ. Something like keeping track of supplies in the Sunday School room or making a dinner for the youth.

It may be through serving on a Committee or agreeing to teach Sunday School in the summer so teachers can have a break. It may be through visiting shut-ins or by coming up with an idea for linking our youngest members and our oldest together. If we feel we are being called to become the church that really loves its children, ALL OF GOD’S children, regardless of ethnicity, background, sexual preferences, status, or education, then we are being called to make promises and keep them.

Whenever we hear the resurrection story, we emphasize that God told the women at the tomb to go and tell! But when we make promises as we join a church or accept the call to be ordained or promise to pray for and encourage a child of God who is being baptized, we are again being reminded, “Go and tell!”

God loves each of us so much that God has said, “You are mine. I will never leave you. In life and death, you belong to me!” Christian communities treasure God’s love, but they do not hoard that love. We do not embrace mercy as a mark of privilege but as a tool for reconciliation in the world. We go and tell with our prayers and our lives and our willingness to serve. As we

step into the waters of baptism with our brothers and sisters, as Jesus did, we are helping build God's household. When we proclaim what God has done for us, when we remember and share our faith with others and when we enter into the work that God in Christ has called us to do, we are keeping our promises. We are fulfilling the great commission to go and teach and preach and baptize ALL nations and we are living the Good News each day. Let us always go and tell! God and tell about God's promises of grace. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

Nazareth Presbyterian Church, Jan. 12, 2020

Today I am going to be talking about promises. Can anyone tell me what a promise is?

It's when you tell someone you are going to do something and really mean it. A lot of times we think about promises when a new year starts.

How many of you or your parents have a calendar? I make one every year for my husband with pictures of our family on it and give it to him for Christmas. This is the calendar for 2020.

When we start a new year, we can make a fresh start and try to do things better than we have been doing them. Some people even make promises about things they want to do. These are called New Year's resolutions. That means they make promises to themselves about things they hope to do in the new year. Did you make any New Year's Resolutions this year?

What are some resolutions you might make?

Eat healthy

Spend more time in prayer

Whether you make any resolutions or not, the new year gives you the chance to forget your past mistakes and look forward to doing better in the year ahead. I hope all of you will take advantage of the fresh start the new year offers us.

Sometimes when people get baptized, they feel like they are making a fresh start. Even Jesus was baptized. When he was on the earth, he told us that we should go into the all the world and make disciples, teaching them all that he taught us, and baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Because Jesus commanded it, the church still baptizes people today. When we see someone baptized, it shows the world that their sins have been forgiven and they have been given a fresh start in life through Christ Jesus.



If you were baptized in this church, everyone here promised to help you learn about Jesus and his love. Look at all the people. If you have a question, you can ask any one of them!

Holy God: We thank you for the love and grace, the power and majesty, the humility and mercy you have shown through your Son Jesus. We thank you that you have made yourself known to us through becoming one of us, that you have shown us that you love us more deeply than we can ever imagine and that you never leave us or forsake us.

Today, as we remember that our Lord was baptized by John in the Jordan river so long ago, we are grateful also that we have been able to share in baptism. You called Jesus by name. You spoke of your love for him. You poured out your spirit upon him. You said that you were pleased with him.

Give us eyes to see and a heart to understand the gift of baptism as the sign of your heart toward Jesus being extended toward us. Help us to hear your voice today, calling each of us by name. Open our hearts to listen to your call to fulfill the promises that we have made in our faithful walk with you.

As you poured out your Spirit on Jesus at his baptism, pour out your Spirit in the world that needs your guidance and presence. Our hearts are breaking as we think of the lives lost in the plane crash in Iran. We hurt for those battling the wildfires in Australia for the dangers that they face and the losses they will deal with.

Be with our nation and the leaders of our country as they deal with decisions that impact all of us and even the world. Give them spiritual strength, wisdom and discernment as they fulfill the promises they made as elected officials. Bless those military men and women who are serving or are training to serve. We pray for peaceful solutions to the struggles for power and the pursuit of justice but thank you God that our nation has brave men and women who stand ready to protect and defend us.

Lord, as we leave the safety and peace of this sanctuary, pour out your spirit afresh on each of us that we might go from this place with a mission, with your joy in our hearts and your word on our lips. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

