

**"The Apostolic Way of Life"**

**"I WILL,  
WITH GOD'S  
HELP."**

*"Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?"*

*I will, with God's help."*

This is the first of a five-part Sermon series that I am preaching this Lent on our Baptismal Covenant. And *that* was the first promise we make at our Baptism, that we will, with God's help, continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.

After his baptism, Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the God into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights, where Jesus contemplated the meaning of his Baptism and the future direction of his life; where he struggled with the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. When Jesus emerged from the wilderness, he began calling his disciples and began his public ministry on the road that led to Calvary.

Mindful of Jesus' experience, the ancient Church developed a season of instruction for new converts to the faith who were preparing for *their* own Baptism at the Easter Vigil, a season which we now call Lent. Eventually the whole Church was yearly reminded by this season of the need for all Christians to reaffirm their Baptismal vows at Easter, something that we still do at Easter and on other Major Feasts; even when there are no baptisms scheduled.

But why? Why is the Baptismal covenant considered so important? Why should we be repeating it year after year? What does our Baptism really mean to us, and what does our Baptism have to do with the future direction of *our* lives? Sadly, for many people, Baptism is viewed as little more than a spiritual insurance policy, just in case there is an afterlife we want to be sure that we have adequate personal coverage. For others, Baptism is viewed as nothing more than membership in the Church, in the same way as one might belong to any other good and respectable organization. It is a recognition of who we are and with what group we want to be identified. For still others Baptism is more of a contract with God, believing if we keep our part of the bargain, then we will enjoy success and happiness in our lives. However in such a contract when things go wrong, we often end up hating ourselves for failing in our promises, or hating God for sending us a fate that we do not deserve. Thus

many Christians, it seems to me, attend Church from time to time only to keep our policy updated, or our membership active, or the bargain in place.

"Covenant" is the biblical word for this strange and wonderful relationship we have established with God in our Baptism. This same Covenant was established by God in creation, and this covenant has survived floods and famines, wars and tumults, the rising and falling of empires. And yet the prosperity of our own modern culture may be the worst blow this covenant has ever been dealt. Still it will survive that too, I am sure.

The Covenant is basically God's promise that "I shall be your God and you shall be my people." Many of us, however, hear an "if" at the end of that promise. "I shall be your God and you shall be my people --- if, if you obey my laws, if you heed my commandments, if you sell all that you own and follow me." And therein lies the great difference between a covenant and a contract. In a contract, each party is required to fulfill their part of the bargain only if the other side does so. You are not required to pay the plumber, for instance, if he doesn't show up. It's a contract. In a covenant, each party makes promises that are not dependent upon the other's faithfulness. Thus God's promises remain true, despite our failures and our shortcomings,

despite our sins and misgivings. That is the very nature of our relationship with God.

The history of the world, biblically speaking, is the history of God's promises to us. When we tell the sacred story, we tend to organize our telling around those promises --- the promise of life to Noah, the promise of a land and nation to Abraham and Sarah, the promise of the law to Moses, the promise of a son to Mary. They are really all the same promise at heart, though that one promise has taken different forms over the years, as God has struggled to remain faithful to the orneriest bunch of partners a deity ever had. For the promise is ultimately of an intimate relationship with God and with one another.

At the heart of our life as Christians is that wonderful experience of God in our midst; a God who is calling us out of the wilderness of our present lives into a new life that is God's. Our Baptismal covenant then is quite simply the embodiment of our response to God's call in our lives. So what is our response?

Our Baptism immediately summons us back into community, a community that shares a common tradition that goes back to the apostles, that enjoys fellowship with one another, that breaks bread together in the Eucharistic feast, and that shares in prayer our concerns with one and another. We are never

Christians in isolation. Our faith is *not* a private matter between God and us, or simply a personal choice. We are by Baptism, part of the Body of Christ, and one part of the body, as St. Paul reminds us, cannot say to another that we have no need of you.

This vision is based upon the example of the early Christians, who we are told in the Book of Acts, devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers. The things Jesus did, the early Christians did: they proclaimed the Kingdom of God was at hand, they healed the sick and cared for the orphan and widows, they welcomed sinners and the outcasts into their midst, they confronted the authorities of their day, and experienced the spirit of God in a new way, in a caring and inclusive fellowship. It was a community in relationship with the Risen Jesus, who was known to them in the breaking of bread at the Eucharist, the family gathered at table together. The goal of the early church was to proclaim that through Jesus, God had entered human life in a unique way and could be now experienced in the love of the Christian community.

The early church grew rapidly, but not because of any organized programs, or because of any carefully stated truths or doctrines, for there was in fact great disorder and disputes in the early church, just as there are now, but the early church

grew and flourished because people saw the quality of the lives of its members changed. And do we not seek to know the person of Jesus in a way similar to how the early disciples knew him? Thus we do not commit our lives in Baptism to some ideal or doctrine, but to the person of Jesus, to a relationship with the living God. We are a people in relationship with God, and with one another through God. Like the early church, we tell our stories, participate in prayer, and experience a new fellowship of love and care for one and another, especially for the poor and needy. In the end, theological beliefs and creeds do not change lives, relationships with each other do. Baptism is about changing the quality of our lives, not by ideas so much as by experiences. Therefore, we promise to be active within the Church at Baptism, within the Christian community, because the Church, the community of the faithful, is where we encounter God and God's people. Baptism is placed at the center of the Christian life because by being members of the faith community, our lives can be transformed and Salvation realized. AMEN