

Reverend Jennifer Creswell
January 8, 2012
Baptism of the Lord
Mark 1:4-11
Baptismal Covenant

Please pray with me. Dear Lord, be good to us; the sea is so wide and our boat is so small. Amen.

I am passionate about the Episcopal Church, as I am passionate about all human expressions of faith, but the Episcopal Church is the particular path that has led me close to God again and again, so I love it. And I'm also passionate about inviting others to find the path that leads them close to God—and I have a good hunch that the Episcopal Church may be that path for a great many *more* people, only the Church—in its mostly lovable human way—has sometimes been better about keeping people out than about throwing the doors open and sharing. I know I've shared this with you before. The rector I worked with in New York used to say that our greatest strength is often our greatest weakness. And that makes sense to me when I look at the Episcopal Church. What are the Church's strengths? Well, to me, they are great liturgy, the Book of Common Prayer, and a beautiful tradition of sacred practices that has been around for hundreds of years. I believe people today are drawn to a lot of these things. But. These strengths can become weaknesses when they cause people to feel like uninitiated outsiders. It's really easy to walk into some churches and figure out what's happening in worship. Not so much in Episcopal churches. The people around the altar dress way differently than the people in the pews, we sit in pews (where else in modern life do you sit in a pew?), we sing ancient hymns, we have names for just about every object inside a sanctuary, and we use language we wouldn't normally use outside of church. These things, these traditions—they're neutral. They're not good or bad. They can be rich tools for connecting us with the Holy, or they can be stumbling blocks because of their foreignness.

I have heard from several of you that you want to learn more about these traditions—the things we do in the Episcopal Church. And I'm right there with you. I don't have a whole lot of patience for religious practices that feel empty. I like to know *why* I'm doing something, to know what it symbolizes, and then I like to interpret it in a way that helps my own faith to grow.

You know the blog “Stuff White People Like?” Well, a couple years ago I got the idea to teach a class at St. Luke's called “Stuff Episcopalians Like.” You know, like one week we'd do red doors, another week we'd do drinking sherry, another week we'd do Thomas Cranmer. And, like so many ideas I have, it got half-baked before it was nudged out of the way by other projects. But today, when we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord, I

thought it might be time to do a little introduction to the Baptismal Covenant. It's something Episcopalians *really* like, and it might clarify a little Anglican theology for you, or at least give you something to think about the next time you're at a baptism. By the way, today is one of the handful of days throughout the year that are especially appropriate for baptisms. Others are Easter, All Saints, and Pentecost.

So, in baptism, there are two kinds of action: there's the Spirit's action toward us—like in the story today from Mark of Jesus being baptized. The Holy Spirit comes down in the form of a dove and names Jesus as God's beloved son. The Spirit works in baptism to affirm the goodness that God has created in us. Then there's our human action toward God. God creates us and blesses us and sustains us...but in baptism, *we show up*. We respond to God's goodness by coming forward, and we get wet as a sign that we're ready to go with God into any situation or place God leads us—even to death. And if you're baptized in an Episcopal Church, part of the 'showing up' piece is the making of the Baptismal Covenant.

You've heard Maureen talk about the Baptismal Covenant. I love that, for her, it's a guiding document in her faith and life. The Covenant is always on the tip of her tongue, and she lives her life by its promises. Here's what I like about the Covenant: it's challenging, and it's honest. As Maureen told me, the promises we make in the Covenant start out easy, but they get so tough as to be impossible. But. In a spirit of honesty, when we say the Covenant, we commit to taking on these challenges *with God's help*.

Why don't you take out the Covenant and we can look at it together. It's on p. 304 of the prayer book. The first part of the Covenant is a Creed, like the Nicene Creed or the Apostle's Creed. In this part of the Covenant we are affirming what we believe as Christians.

And before we go any further, I want to say a little about Creeds. Some of you have shared with me your discomfort with the Creeds because of the very specific nature of what they say. "I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary...On the third day he rose again," etc. People have even told me that the Creed keeps them away from church because it's so uncomfortable for them to stand up and say that they believe everything in it. And I get that. I go through times when I can't say some of the things in the Creed with integrity, because I go through times when I'm struggling to make sense of a complexity of our faith. It's not an easy thing, being a Christian. I know that there are probably as many answers as to why we say the Creed as there are people in this sanctuary. Some of

you may say it with confidence and loyalty. Some of you may not say it at all. Where I've come down is to value belonging over belief. In other words, being part of a community, *this community*, is more important than trying to make sure I believe the same things you all believe in every situation. I get something out of saying the Creed with you all because we have agreed to come here together on Sunday mornings and worship God, and we've agreed that the way we do that, for the most part, works for us. I also take comfort in knowing that, even when I may not be able to reconcile something in my head or heart, there is a body of people here who can hold that reconciliation for me. I say the Lord's prayer every day. I may not be able to "forgive those who trespass against us" every day, but I know that, over years and carried by many hearts, our words work toward the fulfillment of what we pray. So. In the Baptismal Covenant we say a Creed. Together. Affirming our belief in a God who can do more than we can ask or imagine, in a God who may never be fully understood but who will always offer an abundance of love.

And after the Creed, the Covenant asks us to make promises. Okay. Before I go any further, I'm curious about how familiar these promises are to you. And I will happily admit that, before I was ordained (and even for probably 2 years after I was), I couldn't tell you a thing that was in the baptismal covenant. So, on a scale of (put hand down low) I don't recall ever seeing this in my life to (put hand up high) I recite it in the shower every morning, where are you?

So, the Covenant asks us to make promises, and we make them at the time we are baptized (or, if we were baptized as babies, our parents and godparents made them on our behalf). We also renew these promises every time we are present at a baptism—in an Episcopal Church.

Would you read the promises with me? Starting with the attainable and ending with the impossible. We'll read the celebrant's part *and* the people's part. Here we go.

Do you want to know my very favorite part of the whole Covenant? It's those five words "I will, with God's help." Because those words sum up just about my whole theology. Because of God's help, I *want* to live more fully into the kingdom. With God's help, I *keep trying*, even though I fail. With God's help, I do these things and I see glimpses of the kingdom that blow me away—even as few and far between as they are—and with God's help, I keep going back for more. "With God's help" also keeps me honest: everything I have, and everything I am, comes from God. The covenant reminds me that, with God's help, I can do things with great

love. These five words are why I called the Covenant honest. These five words are what allow me to say the Covenant faithfully, to mean what I say, and to have the courage to keep living toward the fullness of God.

Now, I also called the Covenant challenging. It may be foolish to stand up in a room full of people you know and *promise* to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.” Really? *All* people? *Every* human being? It is a challenge for certain. And it takes some humility to be willing to say “could *I* do that?” I have experienced God to be so full of possibility, so unwilling to agree with me when I say “I don’t think I can do that.” Why *not* strive—with God’s help—for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being? Or to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself.

I’m curious about how these promises sound to you. Would some of you be willing to share? I wonder if there’s one promise that strikes you, and if so, why it does. I wonder what role these promises may play in your everyday life. I wonder what your gut feeling is when you read these promises—and whether you said them at your baptism or not. So please let me know if you’d like to share.

To finish up, I want to invite you to say the Creed part of the Covenant with me.