

Sermon - January 8, 2012
Year B - Year of Mark - Baptism of Our Lord
Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

Perhaps it is not apparent, but "Covenant" is a central word when it comes to faith. Covenant is not something new. The Old and New Testaments are full of language about God's agreement or covenant with human beings. The word "testament" means "covenant" and the word "covenant" is something like our word "will." The difference is that in God's covenant we inherit something we cannot fathom. Jesus sealed this covenant when he died on the cross "for our sins and for the sins of the whole world."

The most common covenant we know in daily life is the marriage covenant. This is when a couple makes promises to each other of faithfulness. However, the real covenant at work in our lives every day is the covenant made by God in baptism when we are baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection.

Today's gospel is about Jesus' encounter with his cousin John the Baptist at the River Jordan. Most of us would like to think that if we encountered someone from Biblical times, we would instantly welcome them. However, the truth is someone like John would horrify us if he turned up in church today. He wore a filthy old camel skin. He never cut his shaggy hair; and he never trimmed his beard. He probably only washed when he waded into the Jordan; and he ate an extraordinary diet of grasshoppers.

John the Baptist was also blunt. We say that we like blunt people. However, we actually like blunt people so long as they are not blunt with us. John the Baptist was blunt to everyone. John had been telling every part of the community to "repent." John called people a brood of vipers. He told people what they did not want to hear.

Jesus meets this wild-looking preacher at the river and asks to be baptized. John does not want to do it. He knows that his cousin needs no baptism. John knows that he needs to be baptized by Jesus.

As Jesus is baptized, a voice speaks from heaven. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

What has all this to do with a covenant? It has to do with our baptism. When water was poured on our heads, God adopted us; he makes a covenant with us. Through baptism, we are born as children of God and heirs of God's kingdom.

In baptism, we are marked with the cross of Christ forever. That invisible cross on the forehead signifies that we have been adopted by God and become members of Christ body.

In the Christian vocabulary, the word "member" does not mean someone who joins, but rather, as St Paul reminds us, it means someone who is joined to Christ. Like the limbs and organs of a human body, we are joined to Jesus and to each other. Through

baptism, we become the voice, hands, and feet of Christ in this world. This also means that Jesus shares in our life all that is good, bad, painful, and joyful.

Being joined to Jesus means we share in who Jesus is. That means we live in obedience, forgiveness, humility, and respect. For us humans all of that is the hard part because our nature is to do the opposite.

Have you ever noticed that if you wish to connect or bond with someone, one of the easiest ways to do it is to talk down someone else? Somehow mutually speaking against someone is an easy way to bond with someone. However, that is the exact opposite of what we are to be about as Christians in covenant with God.

Our nature is always to drift towards the negative. That is why God gave us the covenant of baptism. In baptism, we are more than the sum of our sins. In baptism, we are joined to Christ's salvation and forgiveness. Baptism means that God not only forgives our sins, he is able to take them and transform them into something good.

This is what John the Baptist was talking about as he stood by the Jordan. He was telling people to repent. The word "repent" actually means "turn around" and take a new path. In Christ, our sins and lives are turned around as we confess. God takes the burden of our sins and brings us to a point where we can be an expression of Christ rather than an expression of our sin.

That invisible mark on our forehead shows that we are Covenant people. However, alone we cannot live the Covenant. Alone we "err and stray." We are to be an expression of God's people to the world. When we fail and our negative nature over comes us, we are to repent and ask God to forgive us and renew us. Furthermore, we need feeding if we are to grow in the strength of the faith. If baptism begins our Covenant life, in the Lord's Supper the Covenant is fed. We receive Jesus into the very core of our beings as we dwell in Him and He dwells in us.

Inheritance is a wonderful thing. God's Covenant tells us that we have inherited God's Word, God's sacraments, and God's kingdom. As followers of Christ, we hear John the Baptist. Unlike Jesus, we need to turn around and walk in God's ways all the days of our lives. For us, the Baptismal Covenant is a thing of thanksgiving; let us give thanks. Amen.