

“Remember, Renew and Be Thankful”

OT: Isaiah 42:1-9

NT: Acts 10:34-43

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶ You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. ³⁷ That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Did you make a New Year’s Resolution and what exactly is a new year’s resolution?

Some say it’s a to do list for the first week of January. Some look forward to the new year for a new start on old habits. President Truman was quoted in 1953 as saying a calendar is something that goes in one year and out the other, perhaps a new year’s resolution does the same...

Why do some make new year’s resolutions? Michael Ent, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, at Towson University says “the beginning of a new year is an intuitively appealing time to make resolutions because it is **symbolic of a new beginning**. In addition, it constitutes what some self-control researchers refer to as a “**bright line**”—a clear delineation of acceptable and unacceptable behavior.”¹ For example, one may make the clear distinction that not exercising is OK leading up to the new year, but when the ball drops, one signs up for the gym. In lieu of his statement, do we view baptism in a similar light? Is not baptism symbolic of a new beginning, granted certainly more significant and not nearly as repetitive as one would make a new year’s resolution each year? Baptism is not required for salvation, and it only needs to be received once. One does not need to be rebaptized for personal or spiritual reasons. So if we don’t rebaptize and it’s not necessary for salvation, why all the fuss and why do we need to renew and remember our baptism?

I would argue that part of the problem is that we experience *spiritual amnesia*. We may have mountain top experiences in life and in faith, but then return quickly to the valleys. We may experience pain, sorrow or joy- giving thanks to God who sees us through the circumstance, and then forgetting God, somehow, once things get back to “normal”, (whatever normal is). Let’s be honest, God is faithful and we are fickle. Even with the best intentions, our actions don’t always match up. The covenant God makes with us, are broken by us frequently, and therefore needs to be renewed by us. We have spiritual amnesia, we forget, and need to remember and renew. That’s why we are gathered here today, **to remember, renew, and give thanks**.

¹ <https://www.towson.edu/news/2019/new-years-resolutions0131.html>

John Calvin says, “Therefore, as often as we fall away, we ought to recall the memory of our baptism and fortify our mind with it, that we may always be sure and confident of the forgiveness of sins.”² When celebrating baptism and renewing our promises, when the church baptizes those who come forward to receive the sacrament, it helps us to remember, helps us to renew, and reminds us to give thanks.

I’m not sure what your holiday experience was like, but I vowed to not consume sweets for a month or so. Right after, someone offered me a cookie and I honestly forgot about and lost my resolve! (that was a really good cookie I might add...) How easy it is to forget, to lose our resolve! Think of the sermons you have heard, and scripture you have read about taking up your cross daily. To run and not grow weary, to walk and not grow faint. To run with perseverance, the race set before us... surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses and empowered by the Holy Spirit, because with God all things are possible.

Scripture is replete with encouragement to remember, to avoid forgetting what happened, to learn from and remember the past, and to teach those who follow.

Deuteronomy 6:4, Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

⁶ “And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. ⁸ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

2 Timothy 2:2, You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. ² And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

Matthew 28:16, Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always.

Similar to New Year’s resolutions, we need to renew, and remember, and give thanks but...

“Remember you can reset your resolutions on January 14th (Orthodox New Year) and January 25th (Chinese New Year). After that, even I can't help you.”³

In all seriousness, Baptism is a covenant- in the past, covenant making often included a sign, Noah had the rainbow, Abraham had circumcision, Israel has the Passover Lamb, and we have the water of baptism along with the Lord’s Supper.

There is water throughout scripture- water was there in the beginning and it was chaotic, at the end in Revelation chapter 21, even the sea is destroyed, Jesus was nourished in Mary’s womb, baptized in the Jordan river, experienced thirst on the cross, and had his side pierced by the soldier which sent forth water and blood from our Savior’s side. Jesus started his ministry on the Sea of Galilee, changed water into wine, asked for water from the woman at the well and told her he was the living water, healed at pools, restored sight with saliva, and washed his disciples’ feet. Water has both creative and destructive powers in God’s hands. Too much and there is flooding, too little and there is drought and thirst. Yet God comes to us in the waters of Baptism, whether we were immersed or sprinkled, and that’s only the mechanics, God’s presence and

² (John Calvin, 4.15.3)

³ <http://www.jokes4us.com/holidayjokes/newyearsjokes.html>

grace is a mystery shown to us in the ordinary elements of water, bread, and cup. Today we mark the Lord's baptism on the church calendar and we recall and remember our own, even if we were an infant, we celebrate with others and make promises as the church baptizes successive spiritual generations. Even Christ was baptized by John, who felt inadequate to do so. Which reminds me of a different baptism story:

A drunk stumbles across a baptismal service one Sunday afternoon down by the river. He proceeds to walk down into the water and stand right next to the preacher. The preacher asks the drunk, "Mister, are you ready to find Jesus?" The drunk says, "Yes, I am." The preacher then immerses the man under the water and pulls him right back up. The preacher asked, "Have you found Jesus?" The drunk said, "No, I didn't!" The preacher then dunks him under for quite a bit longer, brings him up and says, "Now, brother, have you found Jesus?" The man replied, "No, I have not." The preacher in disgust holds the man under for at least 30 seconds this time then brings him out of the water and says in a harsh tone, "My God, have you found Jesus yet?" The drunk wipes his eyes and says to the preacher... "Are you sure this is where he fell in?"

Baptism is more than falling in the water or being washed in the water. "Baptism belongs to the church; no other organization or society practices it. Yet baptism is not the church's act, but Christ's act in the church. The gospel is offered to the world; the sacraments (Baptism and Communion) give the church identity and strength to be a sign of the gospel in the world. Sacraments are not given directly TO the world, but for the SAKE of the world."⁴ And God shows no partiality, it states as much in verse 34, and he is Lord of all as we read in verse 36. But what about the doctrine of election you might say? Well I'm glad you asked. God does not discriminate by ethnic group or nation, but he does single out those "**in every nation... who fear him and do what is right.**" Take Cornelius as an example, Acts 10:2 says he was "**a devout man who feared God, gave alms, and prayed constantly.**" God did not discriminate by person but he does over sinners who repent and live the life of faith; Lord help us to turn to you through repentance and trust in you through faith.

This speech by Peter in Acts 10 is a complete presentation of the gospel. To turn, repent and have a life changed by faith- for "**everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.**" Therefore, election does not mean that God shows partiality. God chooses those whom God chooses, but not based on human standards and discrimination.

There are two sides of baptism, the divine side, the divine gift if you will, and the human side, the church's response. In repentance we turn to God and in faith we trust in God. God is the primary actor. We act not out of guilt or selfishness, but from gratitude and an assurance that we work in the power of the Spirit. As an act of the church, it is a corporate, not individual act. It is not a mechanical means of transmitting salvation for those being baptized.

Professor Lawrence Stookey writes in his book about Baptism, "The Baptism of every infant should be a renewed Baptism for every adult present. Every baptized adult should feel it a Christian duty and happiness to be present... and it should be an occasion when they go back to the meaning of their own Baptism, and ask themselves whether it was an empty form or the hand of Christ laid on them by the long, long arm of the Church to claim them for a regenerate destiny... They should examine themselves, how far they have kept the faith for which they were claimed... and set apart as Christ's in Baptism by Christ's Church. ...Baptism does not primarily concern the child or parents. It is an act principally for the Church. The whole Church in faith and spirit enters the water. It revives by faith its sense of the eternal life of forgiveness.

⁴ *Baptism: Christ's Act in the Church*, Abingdon, pg. 16, Laurence Hull Stookey

It measures its own faithfulness to its regenerative redemption. It utters its repentance. And it resolves anew, prays anew, to be faithful to the end, to keep and renew its Baptism till death.”

Therefore, baptism is an initiation into the church, so that we are engrafted in Christ, and reckoned among God’s children. Baptism is to serve as Calvin says, our faith before God and to serve our confession before men. We receive forgiveness by the ministry of the church, including the preaching of the gospel, and are called to remember our baptism, renew our faith, and be thankful for these gifts from God. The promise is offered in Baptism and we embrace it in faith.

How do we do this corporately as a church? How do we remember our baptism when many of us were baptized as infants?

Professor Stookey writes, “... look at the analogies in daily life. Our daily actions of breathing and eating are implicit renewals of our birth. Yet once a year, most of us observe explicitly the occasion of birth with a certain amount of festivity. No matter how much we complain about getting older, these birthday parties are expressions of our gratitude for life and reminders of the blessings we may take for granted in the routine activities of breathing and eating. So we highlight them at birthday parties. Candles are blown out to give evidence that the breath of life is very much in us; cake and ice cream are eaten (which may derail our new year’s resolutions by the way...) We sing the same birthday song which is part of our ritual and gifts are given in anticipation that life will continue for the foreseeable future. The birthday ritual is an affirmation of life, expressed periodically as the renewal of birth. So it is not so strange that the renewal of baptism should be marked by certain ritual activities not normally associated with our daily devotion and service to God.”

We observed a ritual earlier by taking the pebble from the water, just as we were taken from the waters through baptism, as a sign and seal of God’s covenant to forgive us and cleanse us from our sins, engrafting us into Christ, and becoming members of Christ’s church.

And as we go from this place seeking the Lord, remembering our baptism, renewing our faith, and being thankful; let us be mindful of our own identity in Christ while respecting and not disparaging those of other Christian denominations or practices. Christ himself said, “**He who is not against us, is on our side.**” (Mark 9:40)

In today’s passage that Peter preached in Caesarea, he said, “**I truly understand that God shows no partiality,³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.³⁶ You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.**

I leave you with the following as a final example and how people show partiality, but God does not:

“Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?"

He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too!

Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What franchise?" He said,

"Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I

said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great

Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern

Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!"

Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over."⁵

The gospel is offered to the world; the sacraments of Baptism and Communion give the church identity and strength to be a sign of the gospel in the world- one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism. May we neither cast stones at others who practice baptism in a different manner, nor forget our own baptism as we go out into the world. In repentance may we turn to God and in faith trust in God. This week and always, by God's grace and mercy, may we remember our baptism, be renewed in our faith, and be thankful to God.

Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him *be* glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

⁵ Emo Philips