

Texts: Matthew 3:13-17, Isaiah 42:1-9

I was baptized as an infant at a Methodist Church, on the corner of Main St. and Middlesex Ave. (Route 27), in Metuchen, NJ. I don't remember the event; I was just an infant. I take it by faith. I'll say that again, I take it by faith.

For the last few months, in our Tuesday morning Bible Study, our group has indulged me in my desire to trace the important theme of covenant throughout the Bible. So far, we've gotten through the Torah and Joshua. God spoke covenant with Noah, after the flood, inclusive of all creation, God's promise not to destroy. God spoke covenant with Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac, and Jacob, and Joseph. We trace the record of a God who weaves promise into creation and human life. God creates spheres conducive for life, nourishing and sustaining well-being, delivering from restricted and diminished life, liberating from death, creating justice for all, clearing a path to freedom, leading God's people to a land rich with promise. Our God promises. God fulfills the promise. God's people, the covenant partner, speak vows to also keep faith, pledging allegiance to only one God, to live loyalty to the one God of goodness, life, love, mercy, justice. But, people fail.

It's the framework of the whole historical human drama. The record of our failure to keep faith is undeniable and tragic. How fragile, how vulnerable are our good intentions! How they are undermined by forgetfulness and neglect and self-centered blundering. Still, God keeps faith. God knows no other way to be, only faithfulness. God so loved the world that he sent his only son, to re-open the path to life, forever. Believe in him, and live. We take it by faith.

The church where I was baptized, on the corner of Main and Route 27, by the time I hit school age, was no longer our church. My parents moved us to the Presbyterian Church. The Methodist church, for whatever reason, was torn down and the site became a bank; not our bank. Doesn't matter. If the church gets torn down. If the mountains tumble into the sea. If the thunder roars and the lightning strikes. No matter. It's baptism; God's covenant holds. Whether we can recall the moment or not, whether we totally bought into it or not, whether we have a written record or not; God spoke covenant. Names me and you: my child. No matter what; bank on it. (Yup, I said that.) God's covenant holds. We take it on faith. We've seen the stuff God's promises hold, no matter what. I look now at the stuff God's promises hold: children of God.

I'm struck by the resistance John the Baptist showed when Jesus appeared at the Jordan River. John knew who Jesus was. Jesus knew who John was. Matthew crafts a dramatic twist, turns the accepted ranking on its head. Jesus came to the Jordan so that John (human) could baptize Jesus (the Christ). The greater one becomes subject to the will and is put in the hands of the lesser human. It's totally upside down. I baptize persons, in proper order, having been authorized by the Presbyterian Church to do so. By order of the church, not just anyone can baptize, or preside at the Lord's Table. The

session must give approval to every baptism and Lord's Supper. There is established authority, especially around the holy sacraments. Power is entrusted only to the hands of the qualified. Jesus, the Lord, gives it to John. "John tried to stop him and said, 'I need to be baptized by you, yet you come to me?'" Human being baptize the incarnate Christ, really? Who is over whom? "Jesus answered, 'Allow me to be baptized now. This is necessary to fulfill all righteousness.'" "Allow me"; it fulfills righteousness, divine intention, trusted to human hands. Jesus Christ assigns John the lead role in his baptism. God's saving covenant, fulfilled in Jesus, does not launch without John the Baptist's consent. "Allow me to be baptized", Jesus asks. The Savior's future is subject to the whim of human will, however flawed. Vulnerable, helpless to do it himself, Jesus depends on John's willingness: allow me to be baptized, says Jesus.

Allow me, the Savior's voice echoes to our willing elders and deacons. Allow me to bless others, to heal, to welcome, to love, to forgive, to baptize, to feed, to fill, to open the path to life and well-being for the world I love. Even if the walls cave in. Even if the funds dry up. If the truth is disputed. If doubt, or despair, or darkness grip you and attempt their nasty tricks. Allow me. Promise. "So John agreed to baptize Jesus." A tender moment of faith, which opened up heaven, amplified the voice of God, eclipsed time and space; allow me. Jesus invites our willingness, again.

I draw from Mary Oliver's poem, *The Return*, for this sermon. In her inimitable way, Mary weaves metaphor, harsh reality, wonder into imagery here of darkness and defeat; the utter abyss. And there, the poet finds, at the literal dead-end, a thread. "Half blind with weariness/I touched the thread and wept./O, it was as frail as air." We hold Isaiah beside her words, with the image of a servant who brings justice to the nations, by attending to the wounded. "He won't cry out or shout aloud or make his voice heard in public. He won't break a bruised reed; he won't extinguish a faint wick, but he will surely bring justice." It's holy covenant; frail as air, essential as water, breakable as bread, painful as blood, these vulnerable vows, fragile I dos, well-meant I wills. Those tender words we know we can't always bank on. Allow me; John baptized Jesus. "He won't be extinguished or broken until he has established justice in the land." That's a God promise. Justice under attack these days, hanging by a thread? "He will surely bring justice." We take the promise of God by faith.

Have you known the thread? The covenant thread. At the table. Beside bended knees. In moist eyes sensing a window to heavenly presence. The faint grip of something you barely detect inside the abyss. The poet writes: "And I turned then/With the white spool/Through the cold rocks,/Through the black rocks./Through the long webs,/And the mist fell,/And the webs clung,/And the rocks tumbled,/And the earth shook./And the thread held." The thread holds. "Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea." (Psalm 46:2)

A thread, we perceive, in the ritual of ordination, running through us; as if it's in our hands. Ordination is nothing but vows and prayers and hands of persons willing to step into a lead role in bringing God's justice. It still holds after all these years. The church is

covenant; living faith in Jesus Christ. In Isaiah, God speaks to exiled Israel: "I give you as a covenant to the people." Faithful persons, all in with divine promise. John baptized Jesus. We animate hope, still fragile, so threatened. We ignite healing, among wounded people. Not breaking a bruised reed, not extinguishing the faintest wick, revealing the glory of heaven, clearing a path to the promised land.

Though the nations stumble and fall. Though familiar structures shift or collapse. Though pillars weaken and crumble. Though the old get older, the sick may get sicker, and the night brings on more darkness. "I, the Lord, have called you for a good reason. I will grasp your hand and guard you, and give you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations, to open blind eyes, to lead the prisoners from prison, and those who sit in darkness from the dungeon. I am the Lord; that is my name." The thread holds.