

“Spiritual Stamina”

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Baptism is the gift that keeps on giving. It is a gift that comes from God alone. Now most of us, if you were raised Presbyterian, do not remember your baptism, but there are moments when we pray, when we may be in worship and we hear a song, like the one the choir just sang, when we feel our baptism at work.

For the Christian, the covenant of baptism means that God will ultimately care for all of us now and always, even in the darkest moments of our lives where we don't feel the presence of God. When everything seems to be going against you - God's plan is still at work in your life. That is the covenant that God made. God made a covenant - which is almost like a legal document. It binds God to you and you to God, so that God will never forsake you and will be with you always. It is the responsibility that God places, that we have and can place on God - and God has expectations of us as well - that we will worship God, that we will praise God, that we will trust in God each and every day, for all of eternity.

Now it is hard to explain these concepts, sometimes. Sometimes it is just easier to just state the opposite and then you can see what “baptismal covenant” actually means.

There are many mythological stories about Satan making contracts with human beings. Those contracts, or covenants, are very different from the baptismal covenant God makes with us. These stories are often prevalent in music, oddly enough. Niccoló Paganini, the famous early 19th century violinist, who was rumored to have made a pact with the devil in order to become a great violinist, so [turning to the violin soloist in worship, Pastor Scott says,] “You play awfully well.” (Laughter)

He died at 58 years of age after having what many described as supernatural talent, even within his own life time - but gambling and womanizing brought him to financial ruin. Even within his lifetime it was understood that Paganini had actually made a pact with the devil. People believed it and understood it and he didn't deny it. So it was accepted that while the Church would pay to have him perform and to write, they understood that upon his death they would not bury him in a Catholic cemetery – and, true to form, they did not.

Another example closer even to our time: (Paganini was from the early 1800s.) Now, in the early 1900s you have another example of a contract with the devil in blues music, which I dearly love; in the mythic story of Robert Johnson - who has been made even more famous by people like Eric Clapton, who have played his music and explained his life.

According to Robert Johnson, he met the devil at the cross roads. In mythical theory folk magic, the cross roads was the place where the supernatural met human beings. On that cross roads - and he shared in the song *The Cross Roads Blues* - Robert Johnson met the devil. In that moment, the devil took Robert Johnson's guitar. (Robert Johnson was just somebody who picked cotton on a plantation, but he played a little guitar.) The devil took Robert Johnson's guitar picked on it, tuned it, played a couple of songs on it and handed it back to Robert Johnson.

According to myth, Robert Johnson could then play with amazing skill his entire life which lasted all the way to the age of 27, when he was killed or died. See, even in his life he was not famous during his lifetime. He was again a terror; he was a womanizer; he was a drinker; he struggled. There were two stories about how he died: One of them was that a jealous husband had poisoned his whiskey which everyone knew he drank a lot of. Another story which is in the documents in Mississippi, is that Robert Johnson actually died of an STD. His life was a mess.

But if you put Paganini's story and Robert Johnson's stories together there is a theme that runs mythically in the idea of making a pact with the devil: (a) you get something but (b) - you end up not wanting it. Both men ended their lives tragically, earlier than they should have, broke. The promises according to the myths that the devil makes in those covenants are not exactly what the person ever wants. See, the devil always wins and you always lose. We are not even talking about the idea of the mythic concept of the devil taking your soul for all of eternity - you always get cheated.

So when you turn to a new covenant, a baptismal covenant, now you see someone in God through Jesus Christ who not only doesn't want to cheat you, but who loves you and calls you by name. When you are baptized we say the name of the child so that God recognizes that name, knows you by name, knows the hairs on your head, knows everything about you and will care for you, forgive you, heal you, restore you.

You can go many other places, make any sorts of covenants - contracts - whatever you like, but everyone else seems to be out for number one: themselves. The one place where you receive the blessing of Almighty God - that's the one place where someone is out for your best interests. That is where God cares and responds to your life, and God gives you the stamina to struggle. Baptism doesn't mean your life is going to be easy and, in fact, I think sometimes people are put in positions of greater struggle when they have the deepest faith, because God knows you have the ability to endure, to sustain, to overcome when others do not. Sometimes you can wear your suffering as a badge of honor, knowing you are carrying the pain of others, and that God will give you the spiritual stamina to endure and to overcome.

But God also is a parent in baptism. Not only do your parents stand up with the child, the infant in baptism, or whoever comes before baptism, but also has God standing beside you in your baptism, also making a commitment to care for you, to instruct and to teach you.

Now in my Wednesday class we had a little question. We didn't deal with it too much. But I didn't have a real good answer and it kept gnawing at me. It's about the whole concept of unquenchable fire.

I went back to a number of writers, one of whom is Kenneth Bailey, whose family has history in this congregation. Kenneth is such a wonderful theologian. He made a comment in one of his writings about the fact that in ancient Middle Eastern tradition, people exaggerated for emphasis. So you don't take it literally, necessarily, that if you misbehave, God is going to consume you with unquenchable fires; keep you out of the granary; is going to burn you away as chaff. It was a warning used in exaggeration to make a point.

The point is you are still accountable in the covenant. Just because God has forgiven you, just because God has healed and restored you and you are in a covenant relationship doesn't mean that we are not accountable. God is a good parent and good parents reprimand their children, all of that burning chaff is just an example of God saying "I will hold you accountable. I will make sure that you will *feel* it if you misbehave." He says that to you and to me in that moment.

Now there are some people who don't want God or anyone else saying you have misbehaved - but we see what happens to children when they are never reprimanded. Look at this very week. The affluenza mother. This 16-year-old boy from a rich family is drunk. He drives a vehicle [while] drunk and kills four people in another car. The judge only gives him 10 years' probation because he [the son] has suffered from affluenza.

He was so affluent that no one - including his parents - held him accountable. Then throw his parents in jail for 50 years! So, low and behold, surprising to everyone and no one, two years later, this "little" person is caught at a drinking party. Ok, this is another example of when social media works: They catch this guy out at a drinking party; he is breaking his probation, you know the story, and so other than holding him accountable - which would have at most meant four years in jail because he was still a minor, his mommy, [who] could not let him be accountable, took him to Mexico. (Now there is a rocket scientist.) Low and behold, they get caught, and now he may - I hope - get dealt with in the future as an adult. She may spend up to 10 years in jail, which she so richly deserves. This is what happens when there is no accountability and when parents do not reprimand their children.

And this is what happens sometimes when we only speak of God's love and peace as some flowery idea. Sometimes the most loving, caring thing parents can do, and what God does for us, is to reprimand us - holding us accountable so that we can learn and grow.

In the conservative church they understand - the Evangelical Church - (I'm here for a reason) but in the real Evangelical Church they do know one thing: they do talk about repentance and God helps teach that there must be repentance. You can't just act in any way that you want and expect to be acceptable. They have taken that wonderful word away from us, and we need to reclaim it because God's accountability as a parent teaching us which helps us to reclaim that we have to be repentant. That is part of the process of forgiveness and restoration, and that is what Jesus was explaining and the Gospel of Luke was explaining through baptism. Jesus didn't need to be reprimanded. He was held accountable by his good deeds. But, I believe his baptism was to restore that example of accountability to the life of a Christian.

So embrace your baptism. Embrace the covenant in the same way that Robert Johnson met the devil on the cross roads in that narrow place of the supernatural. Baptism is the wonderful cross roads for Christians where we go to be close in proximity to the Divine; where we can offer ourselves to God anew, and say, "Loving parent, parent me, heal me, restore me, and may I be repentant enough to receive your instruction and to change my direction."

The word "repeat" in Greek means to turn around, to turn direction and go on the right path, now and always. Amen.