

The First Sunday after the Epiphany - The Baptism of Jesus January 11, 2015
St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

How many of you grew up with the 1928 Book of Common Prayer? How about the 1662 Book of Common Prayer?!

Did you notice a difference when the 1979 Book came into use?! Less so, perhaps for the Rite I service, because the language sounded the same....but stuff got moved around quite a lot, even with though it sounded no different.

The changes weren't accidental, they were intentional. Very intentional. But those of you who were around when the changes happened probably know that.

One of the great Episcopalians of that era, the Rev. Dr. Urban T. Holmes, sometime dean of the School of Theology of the University of the South in Sewanee TN noted in 1981 that “[t]he 1960s was a time when theologians became aware of the bankruptcy of so-called ‘classical theology.’” *Those who resisted the new Book of Common Prayer reflected “a nostalgia for a classical theology which many theologians know has not been viable for almost two hundred years.”* He said that the need for a new liturgy was “*a question of truth for our time.... The task that lies before us is to show how in fact [how we worship is actually the same thing as what we believe] and to rewrite our theology books in the light of our liturgy.*”

Nowhere is this more true than in the way we now understand baptism, and especially in the Baptismal Covenant, that we will briefly recite together around the font.

The thing is, though, the way we understand baptism isn't really new! The Baptismal Covenant presents in a new way something that goes all the way back to St. Paul, who (among other things) believed that baptism was about the individual's incorporation into the community that he described as the body of Christ crucified, a new, radically diverse-yet-unified community of equals who differ only in their roles, not their worth before God or with each other

Baptism marks the beginning of a new, transformed life, which demands of the initiate - and thus of us, who have been baptized - that we live a life in accord with the moral, ethical, and theological principles that underpin “life in Christ.”

When we repeat the promises of the Baptismal Covenant we say “I” - “I will, with God's help.” That “I” is important - you'll notice that every Sunday when we say the Creed we say “we”....”we believe.....” - it's a corporate affirmation - a loyalty oath if you will. But when we say the Creed on this day we say the baptismal Creed, we make a personal statement. We as individuals place ourselves within the arms of the community of faith, the body of Christ, and make a personal commitment not only that we have chosen, as it were, to hang our hats on the hatrack of Christian faith, but also that we will act in certain ways as a consequence.

The five commitments we're about to make talk about those certain ways - they say “this is what it means to be a Christian.” The first is a direct quote from the Acts of the Apostles 2:42 which

says “[The newly baptized - all 3,000 of them]devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers:” Listen to the teaching and follow it, maintain the fellowship, worship together - worship together embracing the vision of the radically diverse fellowship of the baptized.

And remember - you might fall down...you will fall down. Pick yourself up, recognize where you made a mistake, seek forgiveness, move on.

The tricky part about the Baptismal Covenant is that it doesn’t stop there; it doesn’t stop with the internal focus - on the community of faith, on each other, and on ourselves. The last three promises are outwardly focused: serving, proclaiming, working for dignity and justice for all.

Each time we do this we are confirming for ourselves and for each other that our lives as individuals and our common life should mark us out as different from the way the rest of the world works. It isn’t that we will avoid the stresses and strains, the struggles and the fights, the disagreements – it’s what we do when those things happen to us.

What we do is what the Covenant says: continue in fellowship, repent when we fail, and work and work as servants of God, which means also of each other, for God’s future of peace and justice.

May we be able to live the promises we make today!

Amen.