

God's Promise To Our Children

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, I say to you again, welcome to Church of the Advent, especially if you're joining us for the first time. We are delighted that you're here.

This is a wonderful Sunday because we have an opportunity to celebrate baptism. We'll have a couple of people baptized a little bit later in the service, and that's very appropriate for this time of year.

We're in the season of epiphany, and that's one of the themes of epiphany is baptism. And so I thought it would be appropriate to spend some time this morning before we actually do these baptisms to talk about baptism.

It's something that I've preached on a few times, but I've never actually preached specifically on infant baptism and why we would do the practice of infant baptism.

So that's what I wanna look at this morning in particular. All Christians, virtually all Christians in the world agree that we should baptize people once they come to faith in Jesus.

[0 : 58] So that's not really up for debate. But there is a disagreement over the children of believers. What should we do there? Some people believe we should baptize them, and some do not.

Why would we baptize a baby before they are old enough to come to faith to choose to follow Jesus for themselves? So that's what we're gonna be talking about this morning. Now, a couple of caveats that we have to hit right up front.

Caveat number one, in our church, we have people on both sides of the issue. It's one of the great things about our church, one of the things I love about our church. A lot of people in our church have not come from an Anglican background or come from a background where this was the case. And so this is an area where people in our church disagree. And this is an area where faithful Bible-believing Christians can disagree. So the good news is, everybody's welcome here.

As an Anglican church, infant baptism is normative for us. But there is freedom for those who disagree. So ultimately, we encourage parents, we leave it up to parents to decide before the Lord how to raise their children in the faith and the role that baptism plays.

[2 : 11] But I do think that this is something that we all need to understand. And there are probably people here who have always agreed with infant baptism but never really understood why.

Or maybe they agree with it for the wrong reasons. And so I think it's important to spend time on it. That's caveat number one. Caveat number two, this sounds like a super niche topic that only applies to Christian parents of kids.

It is, in a sense. But it's also something that I think, hopefully you will agree after we spend some time on it, applies to every single person in this room.

And in fact, it's something that applies to every single person in the world. Because the fact is, if you understand baptism, you begin to understand the heart of God. The purpose of baptism is to put on display for the world to see the very heart of God.

The fact that God loves you and the lengths to which God will go that you might belong to him as a member of his family.

[3 : 24] And so my hope is that wherever you are in your journey, if you're a Christian parent about to have a baby trying to figure out what to do, or if you're somebody who just walked in off the street and you're not a Christian and you're like, I think I picked the wrong Sunday.

Regardless of where you are, my hope and prayer is that this, by the end, you will see why this is relevant to all of us. So what we're gonna look at, essentially, in a nutshell, is that all of this is about a promise.

It's about a promise. It's about a promise given by God to Abraham, signified in Israel by circumcision, and signified in the church by baptism.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word and as always, we come with our own hopes and expectations, needs and distractions. If our hope only rests in our wisdom and our strategy and our highest thoughts, then Lord, we are lost.

But our hope rests in the truth that we just celebrated at Christmas, that you are Emmanuel. You're the God who is with us, a God who speaks to us, a God whose word is living and active, a God who desires to renew our hearts.

[4 : 36] And we pray that through your word this morning, you would do what only you can do. In the power of your spirit, in the name of Jesus, amen. All right, so the first piece of this is to understand that all of this begins with a promise that is given by God to Abraham.

In order to understand baptism, we have to understand the origins of the gospel itself, which is the core hope of Christianity and the thing that really sets Christianity apart from all of the other religions and philosophies, ancient and modern, that attempt to offer hope to the world.

Because other religions say that the only way to have a relationship with God, the only way to gain the blessing of God, is to earn it. You have to prove through your obedience and your devotion that you are worthy of the blessing of the divine.

Only the best get blessed. That's the message. But in the book of Genesis, we meet a man named Abram. And Abram is just like us.

He's flawed. He's a sinner. He messes up all the time. And yet he's able to have the kind of relationship with God that we all want.

[5 : 53] He is loved by God. He is extraordinarily blessed by God. And it raises the question of, how is such a thing possible for such an obviously flawed individual?

And the answer is found in Genesis chapter 15. God comes to Abram and he announces his plan to redeem and restore the world through Abram's offspring.

I'm gonna build a community as numerous as the stars. And in Genesis 15 verse six, it says this, and Abram believed the Lord and he counted it to him as righteousness.

And we cannot overestimate the world-changing importance of this statement. God credits Abram's faith to him as righteousness.

In other words, God says this, even though that you're sinful and even though nothing that you do will ever make up for the degree to which you have rebelled against me and rejected me, you'll never make up for that.

[7 : 01] Even still, if you're willing to trust me, if you're willing to trust my promises and believe them, then I will cover your sin and I will welcome you into relationship with me and I will give you all of the privileges that would come with being a fully righteous person.

I will treat you as though you were righteous. And we say, well how could God just overlook sin? We'll get there. So God offers Abram a relationship based on faith, not good works, and he says, I will, if you have faith in me, I will credit this to you as righteousness.

So this is now, for the first time in the world, a relationship with God that nobody has ever seen before. You mean, I don't have to earn it through obedience and devotion, but God wants your devotion.

God delights in your good works. But your relationship is now based on your faith in him. It changes everything. But it does raise a question. Is this something that only applies to Abram?

Or is this something that God intends to do for other people? And at this point in the story, we don't know yet. What we then see is that God makes an eternal promise to Abram that he will do this for anyone and everyone who comes to him in faith.

[8 : 33] In Genesis chapter 17, two chapters later, God makes a covenant, which is a formal agreement with Abram. And he essentially says this, for all eternity, from here forward for all eternity, when the conditions of the covenant are met, i.e. when you have faith in me, that's your end of the covenant, when the conditions of the covenant are met, meaning faith, God promises that he will forgive their sin and credit their faith to them as righteousness.

So God is saying, my plan to renew and restore the world is going to be built on this kind of relationship. Your side of the covenant is to believe in me, to have faith in me, and I will forgive and welcome you into my family.

And then God renames him Abraham because he says, as a result of this, I've made you the father of a multitude of nations. Not just your descendants, but a multitude of nations are going to be blessed by this.

Because God's going to do it not just for the blood relatives, but for any foreigner who wants to have this kind of relationship with God, any non-Jewish person, this is going to be open to them as well. And then, God gives an outward, invisible sign of this promise. How are people going to know this? How are they going to remember it? What's the way that we're going to stay focused on this promise?

[10:06] God says, I'm going to give you a visible mark. I'm going to seal this promise so that you'll always know that I keep my word. And he gives them the symbol, the sign of circumcision.

And we say, well, why circumcision? That sounds kind of odd. It's a bit barbaric. It is barbaric. In circumcision, there is a shedding of blood.

Some blood is shed. And this points forward 2,000 years into the future when Jesus Christ would come and when Jesus would shed his blood on the cross, which is infinitely more barbaric, in order to pay the price for sin.

And you say, well, that's how God is able to cover and forgive the sin of someone like Abraham. Because God knows that one day he's going to send his own son to pay the price for all of that sin. And so, even though they didn't know it at the time, those who were circumcised for 2,000 years, they were ultimately putting their faith in Jesus.

[11:19] They didn't know it. As I shed a little bit of blood, I'm putting my faith in the ultimate shedding of blood. So God tells Abraham to be circumcised and to circumcise his entire household.

Every male in Abraham's house and in every future generation. So Abraham gets circumcised. He's 99. That's one of the reasons we recommend doing it a lot earlier.

He's 99. And he circumcises his son Isaac when he's 8 days old. And again, we ask, well, so why does he circumcise Isaac when he's only 8 days old?

He can't possibly understand the shedding of blood and everything we just said. When Abraham circumcised Isaac, he's saying this to him. I'm gonna raise you and I'm gonna teach you all about the love and the truth of God.

And God has promised to do for you, Isaac, what he has done for me. When you come to faith, God has promised that he's going to forgive your sin and he's gonna credit your faith to you as righteousness just like he did for me.

[12:29] And he's gonna adopt you and make you his son just like he did for me. And how are you going to know this, Isaac, as you grow up? Your circumcision is a sign and a seal of God's promise.

So don't just take my word for it. God wanted you to have this sign as a guarantee that God will do this for you when you come to faith. Right, so for 2,000 years, the sign of the covenant was given to believing adults and to their children, the children of believing parents.

Did this save Isaac? No. No. Did this guarantee that Isaac would be saved? No. It is simply God's promise that if and when Isaac comes to faith, God promises that he will do for him what he did for Abraham.

I will forgive your sin and I will welcome you into relationship on the basis of your faith alone. That's the promise. So circumcision was a visible sign given to the people of Israel of God's pledge to forgive the sins of the people who put their faith in him.

And we say, okay, well that's great, nice Old Testament lesson. What does that have to do with today and the church? After 2,000 years of waiting, Jesus Christ comes into the world.

[13:55] And he comes as a part of, he enters into a family descended from the line of Abraham. Abraham, and he comes to fulfill everything that God had spoken to Abraham, everything that had been declared.

And he sheds his blood, and he brings God's blessing to the nations. And then after his death and resurrection, Jesus stands with his disciples before his ascension, and he gives them their final commissioning.

Here's your life mission. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, Jesus says. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

And behold, I'm with you to the end of the age. And not long after, after Jesus then ascends, the Holy Spirit comes, and there's a massive outpouring of God's blessing.

And the apostle Peter stands up in the power of the Holy Spirit, and he preaches to the multitudes, and he tells the story of Jesus. And they're all cut to the heart, and they say, what should we do? [15:13] What do we do? And for the most part, these are circumcised Jews from various places. And they say, what should we do? And Peter says this, repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Be baptized in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. And the same promise that God made to Abraham is extended to the church.

They say, okay, repent and be baptized. Why should we be baptized? Here's what Peter says. For the promise is for you, and for your children, and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord, our God, calls to himself.

The same promise that God made to Abraham, that God made to Isaac, that God made to all of those generations of families, all for 2,000 years, Peter then says, that promise is for you, and it's for your children, and it's for anyone that the Lord would call to himself.

But the sign of the promise will no longer be circumcision. From the birth of the church on, there is a new sign.

[16:31] Same promise, new sign. The sign of the promise will no longer be circumcision. From now on, baptism will be the sign of God's promise. After Jesus comes, baptism takes the place of circumcision as the sign of God's promise.

Same promise, new sign. So believing parents were now called to put the mark of God's pledge on their children, not in the form of circumcision, but now in the form of baptism.

Does it save them? No. Does it guarantee their salvation? No. What does it do? The same thing that it's done for 2,000 years. It's a mark of God's pledge that when that child comes to faith, God will forgive their sin and claim them as his own, and they will receive all of the blessings of the covenant.

It's a sign of God's promise. And you say, well, are we sure? What's the connection between circumcision and baptism? How do we know? This is something that Paul, the Apostle Paul, explicitly addresses in Colossians chapter 2.

He's writing to Christians who have been baptized, but they've not been circumcised. And there's a big question in the church. Well, should we also get circumcised? And if you really mean it, should you get both?

[17:54] Should you be circumcised and then baptized? And how does that work? And here's how the Apostle Paul answers this. He says, you don't need to get circumcised.

Why not? Because you're already circumcised. You're already circumcised. And they're like, I'm pretty sure I'm not. And he says, no, you bear the mark of God's promise through your baptism. You've been circumcised with a circumcision made without hands in your baptism. And you say, well, why would God change the mark?

Why a new sign? Well, because Jesus has come. Right? For 2,000 years, circumcision looked forward to what would need to happen as we shed blood.

We know that one day blood will need to be shed in an ultimate sense for all of the world. So we're looking forward. Right? Baptism looks back and it says, this is the result of the fact that Jesus' blood was shed.

[19:08] The focus is not on the fact that it's going to happen. The focus is on the effects of that. The washing away of sin through the shedding of Jesus' blood. Right?

The death to the old life and the sin nature and the raising to life again of people in Christ and the filling of the Holy Spirit, the fulfilling of all of the covenant blessings.

So circumcision looked forward, baptism looks back and says, because of this, all of these blessings are now ours to enjoy. So to pull all of this together, all of this, as I said at the beginning, is about God's promise that when someone expresses faith, he will forgive sin and claim them as his own.

This is a promise that was given to Abraham. It's signified in Israel by circumcision and it is now signified in the church by baptism.

Same promise, new sign. Now I know some people hear this and very understandably, people say, well, you know, if this is true, then why do we not have any examples of an infant being baptized in the New Testament?

[20 : 24] And I would say, yeah, while it's true that there's no specific reference to an infant being baptized, curiously, every single adult baptism that is described in the New Testament explicitly states that they were baptized along with their entire household.

So somebody comes to faith, Lydia, or Cornelius, or Crispus, or the Philippian jailer, they come to faith and it says immediately they were baptized along with their entire household.

In each case, the adult comes to faith and they're baptized along with everybody who lives in their home. The only exception to this is, of course, the Ethiopian eunuch who, for obvious reasons, does not have a household, does not have a wife or children because he's a eunuch.

Another question that people will ask, and again, very honest question, where's the verse in the Bible that tells us we should baptize babies? And I would say there's not one.

There's not an explicit verse that says, you shall do this. But I would also say this, for 2,000 years, God's people put the mark of God's promise on their children.

[21 : 41] For 2,000 years, they put the mark of his promise on their children. And then when we look at church history, the early church fathers write about infant baptism with the assumption that it is a normative practice.

Origen actually writes explicitly that the church received from the apostles the tradition of giving baptism to infants. We have a liturgy, a baptismal rite from the second century that includes and assumes the inclusion of children and infants in the rite.

And then we see that infant baptism is universally practiced everywhere in the church through all of church history up until after the Protestant Reformation. The magisterial reformers not only upheld it, but they actually defended infant baptism with a kind of renewed biblical vigor.

So in light of all of that, we would actually ask the opposite question. You know, I would tend to think, where is the verse that tells us we should not baptize infants.

The theological position that rejects infant baptism is called credo-baptism. And it's the idea that you should only baptize people after they come to faith. And this arose in the 17th century as a part of the English Reformation.

[23 : 06] This is where the origins of this theology really are found. And this led to the formation of certain denominations that remain in our society today and societies all around the world.

And again, I want to say, I've sort of made the argument for you, but I just want to reaffirm to all the brothers and sisters who hold to this position, tremendous respect for you and for this position.

And this is an area where faithful Christians can disagree. And in our church, you're free to hold either view and we celebrate both. because regardless of your position on this, we all share the same motivation.

We take very seriously our commitment to raise children to know the love of Jesus and to follow Him faithfully. That is the thing that we all agree on.

Right? And either view can become distorted if we're not very careful. Right? For people who believe in the baptism of infants, paedobaptists, there's a danger for people who practice infant baptism to make the mistake of believing that baptism saves our children, that there is something about the water that saves them.

[24 : 23] Or to make the mistake of believing that because they've been baptized, it guarantees their salvation at some point. This is not only not seen at all in Scripture, but it can actually lead to a very laissez-faire attitude when it comes to raising our children in the faith.

It becomes a kind of box that we check. And that's incredibly dangerous. It's dangerous for the spiritual well-being of our children. The responsibility of parents is crucial for us to have a right understanding of baptism.

The Bible teaches that God works through believing parents to bring children to faith. 1 Corinthians 7 has always mystified me. Paul is writing, imagine a scenario where you have a single parent who has come to faith.

Their spouse is an unbeliever and they're looking at their young baby and they're thinking, what is possibly going to happen? What hope do I have?

I'm the only Christian in my household. So Paul writes to those people and he says this, because of your faith, your children are holy.

[25 : 38] Does he mean they're saved? No, but what does he mean? They are set apart. They are to be treated as members of the covenant community. Your faith covers them.

Right? Your faith covers, and the sanctifying work that God is doing in your life is flowing into their lives. So he's saying, God will work in their lives through your faith.

And your faith will cover them until they're old enough to express faith for themselves. And so when an infant is baptized, the parents do two things. And they're both, you're going to see this in just a moment.

First, they make the baptismal vows on behalf of their children because their faith covers their children. As the Apostle Paul writes. And then, they promise to teach the faith to their children, to devote themselves to the formation of their children until the child is able to embrace the faith for themselves.

And only then are they saved. And there's a prayer in the liturgy where we say, we can only use water. God has to baptize with the Holy Spirit. Only God can bring this child to saving faith.

[26 : 49] And that's what we pray for. Right? So the role of parents is crucial. There's likewise some dangers that come with people who hold to a believers-only baptism position or what we would call credo-baptists.

There's a danger in this view, a danger of distortion. It doesn't apply to everybody, but for some people, there can be an emphasizing of the experience of the baptism, of focusing on a desire for the child to have the experience and the memory of it.

There can also be a kind of focusing on the fact that baptism, because it's something that we do after we come to faith, then the focus of baptism really becomes our individual choice and commitment to God.

It's ultimately a way for us to pledge ourselves to God. And I've seen the way this can sometimes lead to fear and anxiety. Do I really mean it?

You know, when I got baptized at summer camp as a sixth grader, I really felt it. But now, as a sophomore in college, I'm really struggling. And I don't know if I mean it anymore.

[28 : 00] And what does that mean for me? Do I need to get baptized again? And so some people over the course of their lives will periodically rededicate themselves to God because they feel like they have fallen away, that they used to mean it, but they're not sure what they think anymore.

And their Christian life becomes a place of anxiety. Their baptism becomes a symbol of that anxiety and fear of how much can I really pledge myself to God. And I would say if we understand what we've seen here this morning, baptism is not ultimately about the promises that we make to God.

And that's good news because we tend to be really good at breaking promises. Baptism is not about the promises that we make to God. Baptism is about the promises that God makes to us.

and God never breaks his promises ever. So for a child who has been baptized as an infant, parents may be sad but they may say well they're never going to remember this.

They may not remember when it happened but they are going to grow up knowing that God has put his mark on them. That God has already made a promise to them before they were even conscious.

[29 : 16] He's already made a promise to them that he stands ready to receive them. And so every time children are called to remember their baptisms what are they remembering?

They're remembering the fact that God's posture toward them is this. I'm ready to receive you. All you have to do is ask and I will wrap my arms around you and there's nothing that you can do that will put that in jeopardy because I've already promised that all you have to do is come to me and ask and you're mine.

And I think that's incredibly powerful for our children to be reminded of again and again and again. Every time we do a baptism we encourage all parents of baptized kids help them remember their baptism.

Tell them the story of it. Light the candle that we give you and tell them all the details of who was there and what was it like and how did you feel and did you cry and knock the water over and how whatever happened remind them that story and remind them of God's promise.

The point that I want to leave everybody with I told you if you're here you walked in off the street you think you made a huge mistake there's going to be something here for you. Here's the point. This applies to everyone here.

[30 : 35] To understand baptism is to understand the very heart of God. We can often think that God is sort of standing back vaguely or even significantly disappointed in us I gave you so much and look what you've done with it and that God is kind of waiting for us to get it right waiting for us to get our act together waiting for us to finally get serious about our faith waiting for us to finally stop doing all that junk that is tearing us down and that God is just kind of waiting kind of like a frustrated

disappointed parent about ready to give up or maybe you think that God has completely given up baptism is meant to be a visible sign and witness to the world of God's heart it is meant to be a public symbol it's not just for our assurance it's something that puts the gospel on display for the world to see that God wants you to come to him in faith that God stands ready to receive you with open arms that there's nothing that can stand in the way of that if you're willing to put your faith in him you can and will belong to him for all eternity it's an invitation to the world it's an invitation that we have the opportunity to respond to even in this very moment and I pray that some of you who are feeling distant and disconnected from God will do just that let's pray

Lord we thank you for your grace may your grace and your promises pervade our time here may your words that are true sink deeply into our hearts as we remember our own baptism and as we celebrate the baptisms this morning use these as a sign of assurance assure us of your love for us and that we belong to you those of us who are struggling who are deconstructing who are filled with doubt who are hopeless or filled with despair use baptism to shore us up that it's okay to fall apart because we are held firmly by your grasp and you'll never let us go we pray this in your son's holy name amen to you you