

Baptismal Living: Steadfast Covenant of Hope

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Baptism is deeply grounded in the generosity of God. Like all other biblical covenants, whether the Hebraic covenants of Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Jeremiah, or the new covenant proclaimed by Paul and others, baptism is a response to God's initiating love. Today we who are called forth by water and the Spirit are, like our biblical ancestors, summoned to lifelong relationship with God. The theological foundation for baptismal living is grounded in the expectant hope God holds out for us, pursued in humanity's hope-filled response in seeking God's reign, and expressed in the persistent hopefulness of daily living. As the traditional hymn text asserts, "All our hope on God is founded."

In Jim Griffiss's theology the "courage to worship," as he called it, gives us hope. The sacraments of baptism and eucharist are filled with hope because they strengthen and encourage us to look toward the future rather than feel resigned to the past. Jim's persistent hopefulness about theology, the students he taught and the colleagues he cherished, has many witnesses. Toward the end of his life he continued to work with the *Anglican Theological Review* and the Presiding Bishop to gather scholars around topics crying out for theological attention. Furthermore, throughout Jim's life, culminating with his reflections in *The Anglican Vision*, he deepened our understanding of Christian life from baptism until death.

We are now paying renewed critical attention to baptism and to the formative, hope-filled theological foundations of this sacrament. Two contemporary shifts make this necessary, one liturgical and the other societal. One major perspective for change is evident in the positive ecumenical and denominational achievements of the modern liturgical renewal movement, which has restored baptism to liturgical prominence and made it a focus of religious identity. We know that the

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loving kindness of God exceeds any response we can make, but even so, from time to time in the church's history, we move liturgically closer to a glimpse of covenanting partnership. Liturgical renewal during the second half of the twentieth century offered contemporary Christians the opportunity to renew their theological understanding of baptism. Anglicans, among other Christians, have moved from a private, domestic celebration of this moment in an infant's life to promises that are publicly made, shared, held, and affirmed in gathered community amid individual lifetimes of godly living. We are moving away from patterns that obscure the fact of God's goodness in creation. Ecumenically, as affirmed in the World Council of Churches' text *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, baptismal theology has shifted from an emphasis upon the stain of original sin to the promise of new life in Christ. We may no longer ask, as we did in the past, "What happens if the infant dies?" Today we might rephrase the question to ask, "What happens if the infant lives?"¹ Whether the candidate for baptism in a parish today is an infant, a youth, or an adult convert, contemporary pastoral preparation for baptism holds meaning for life. For all participants—candidates, godparents, sponsors, and the community gathered to witness and support baptismal promises—the gift of baptism extends life-changing implications.

A second shift that impels us to reexamine religious formation in baptism today is occasioned by violent religious divisions and genocide. The Holocaust changed the shape of theology, underscoring the problem for Christians and Jews alike in speaking of God "after Auschwitz."² It is a startling fact that forty-five million Christians were also martyred during the twentieth century, from those Armenians executed for their faith early in the century up through the 800,000 Tutsis massacred in Rwanda toward the century's end.³ In

¹ Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 70.

² See, for example, Moltmann's autobiographical note on the development of his theology of hope in A. J. Conyers, *God, Hope, and History: Jürgen Moltmann and the Christian Concept of History* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1988), 203-223; and Elie Wiesel, *After the Darkness: Reflections on the Holocaust*, trans. Benjamin Moser (New York: Schocken Books, 2002).

³ See Michael J. McClymond, "Making Sense of the Census, or, What 1,999,563,838 Christians Might Mean for the Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (December 2002): 884-885, with statistics drawn from the *World Christian Encyclopedia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Donald E. Miller, "April Is the Cruellest Month," *Sightings*, 5/2/03, The Martin Marty Center at the University of Chicago Divinity School.

these and other massive outbreaks of ethnic cleansing, religious identity and religious rhetoric have been used to polarize and divide. With such compelling claims upon our attention in communities of faith and within the wider global community, we dare not fantasize or become nostalgic about religious rites of initiation. Nor is it biblically honest to hold privatized religious commitments that are blind to the suffering of others or that are otherworldly. Nor, in this increasingly multifaith world, can people of any faith hoard God's generosity in one religious tradition. In such hard times, attempts to speak honestly about formative religious identity today carry a critical urgency that encompasses multifaith visions of reconciliation.

For Christians, baptism provides an optimistic and hopeful orientation that paradoxically situates us amid human suffering in the world for which Christ died. Anglican liturgical scholar Louis Weil strongly advocates the renewal of baptismal theology as a foundation that will allow us to "coexist with other world religions" and with those who are indifferent to religion.⁴ Weil, among others, calls for the renewal of a baptismal ecclesiology that is effective liturgically, socially, and globally. This essay speaks of theology from the standpoint of hope as it is embedded in baptismal living, liturgically represented in covenantal promises, expressed in ministry, directly attentive to evil and suffering, and open to dialogue with people of other faith communities. As a lifelong Episcopalian I experience and will recount the baptismal story as biblically grounded and liturgically expressed in the Prayer Book service of holy baptism. In particular, the baptismal covenant found in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer sets a hopeful framework for baptismal living. I have shaped the structure of these reflections in accord with the creedal affirmation and the five promises made by those who wish to renew their commitment to Christ in the baptismal covenant.

The theological emphasis in baptism is based on God's action, expresses God's hopeful interest in humanity, and reveals God's generosity in creation. The great neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth is said to have remarked: "God is omnipotent, God is omniscient, and now a few words about baptism." Theologically it is important to recall that in baptism, as in creation, we are bearing God's energy and spirit. Baptism is not simply or only an individual decision; it is pri-

⁴ Louis Weil, *A Theology of Worship* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 2002), 127.

marily about God acting and the community of faith responding. It is God's doing that calls forth our responsiveness. Baptism is an expression of God's hope for a people: created, chosen, and adopted anew as God's own. In the earliest Prayer Book services Thomas Cranmer liturgically accentuated, in the promises made and assurances given, that the newly baptized are joyfully received into the arms of Christ.⁵ Indeed, Anglican theologians from Richard Hooker and F. D. Maurice up to the present day have emphasized that baptism declares God's goodness to humanity. At one time Maurice, frustrated by his contemporaries' emphasis on original sin instead of on the promise of baptismal renewal for humanity, is said to have exclaimed, "We are called Christians, not Adamites!" Similarly, in a nineteenth-century Church of England sermon, a colleague of Maurice described baptism as commencing "with a benediction, and not with a curse."⁶ William Countryman, a New Testament scholar and Episcopal priest, recently described baptism as interpreting "the gift bestowed in birth." This sacrament reaffirms and renews the holy character of creation. It expresses God's continuing engagement with and hope for humanity.

Appropriately, our response to God in the baptismal covenant starts with an affirmation of faith. This covenant begins with the Apostles' Creed recalling Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and affirming God's triune nature. The 1979 Prayer Book liturgy retains the historical development of creeds as baptismal statements. Moreover, reciting the creed as part of the contemporary baptismal covenant recalls the early Christian baptismal practice where the creed was spoken by the candidate for baptism in response to three questions. In today's baptismal service, all who are present are invited to participate in the creedal affirmation of faith. Each time a baptism takes place members of the congregation are more than observers, witnesses, or even sponsors; all are able to renew their faith in a God who extends a new covenant of hope to humanity.

From the people's affirmation of faith in the Apostles' Creed, the baptismal covenant proceeds to address what one priest aptly calls

⁵ See Stephen Sykes, "Baptisme Doth Represente unto Us Oure Profession," in *Unashamed Anglicanism* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abington Press, 1995), 3-23.

⁶ J. L. Davies, "Baptism, An Admission to the Privilege of Worship," in *The Worship of God and Fellowship among Men, A Series of Sermons on Public Worship Preached at Christ Church, St. Marylebone* (Cambridge: Macmillan and Co., 1858), 66.

“the consequences of faith in daily living.”⁷ What kind of responses will each of us make in our daily lives? In the baptismal covenant, all present are invited to respond to five questions that move from commitments to continuing formation, to repentance, proclamation, service, and the search for justice and peace. There are several different and appropriate ways to explore these five promises in the baptismal covenant. Theologian Ian Douglas, for example, points to this covenant as a charter for the baptized to engage in mission.⁸ In *Living Water* educator Klara Tammany provides multidimensional pathways for adult formation built around baptismal promises,⁹ while Deborah Flemister Mullen describes baptism from an African American perspective as a “sacrament of struggle.”¹⁰ I have chosen to frame these questions as expressing a covenant of hope, which accords biblically with God’s overriding purpose in offering humanity a future and a hope. Even in times of serious displacement, as presented again and again by the prophets, God’s hope is for the long haul, not for a quick fix or a fast “return to normalcy.”¹¹ The first letter of Peter, sometimes described as a sermon on baptism, proclaims “new birth into a living hope” (1:3).¹² This is an ongoing process. Baptism does not rest alone on a past promise taken by us or for us by others, nor is it a pledge to insure our future security. Hope is the basis for our present and continuing response, our responsibility to God. As such it bears repeating. Sara Maitland, a Christian feminist theologian, underscores the nature of this responsibility:

Hope lies rather in accepting that God’s engagement in the creation gives us not just the right, but the obligation to create and sustain the future. . . . Hope is the basis for taking responsibil-

⁷ Christopher L. Webber, *A User’s Guide to Morning Prayer and Baptism* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse Publishing, 1997), 37.

⁸ Ian T. Douglas, “Baptized into Mission: Ministry and Holy Orders Reconsidered,” *Sewanee Theological Review* 40:4 (1997): 435–436.

⁹ Klara Tammany, *Living Water: Baptism as a Way of Life* (New York: Church Publishing, 2002).

¹⁰ “Baptism as Sacrament of Struggle and Rite of Resistance,” in Susan E. Davies and Sister Paul Teresa Hennessee, eds., *Ending Racism in the Church* (Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 1998), 66–73.

¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Hope within History* (Atlanta, Ga.: John Knox Press, 1987), 87; Brueggemann’s insights have repeatedly guided my efforts in this essay.

¹² Daniel J. Harrington, *The Church According to the New Testament: What the Wisdom and Witness of Early Christianity Teach Us Today* (Franklin, Wis.: Sheed & Ward, 2001), 74.

ity: for claiming our capacity to create, to make a genuinely new thing. It is also the springboard for trying to act justly, and for accepting absolutely our incorporation into each other.¹³

More than participating in a Sunday morning baptism and eucharist, the baptismal covenant invites each one of us to be daily participants in living hope. Fortunately we are reminded of this responsibility to take hope each time a baptism occurs.

We are not left alone or without resources for this journey in hope. Accordingly and appropriately the first affirmation extended in the baptismal covenant is a commitment to lifelong religious formation through worship, prayer, Bible study, and life together in community. We are asked to recognize this need for ongoing formation when we pledge to “continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.”¹⁴ The nourishment that comes through observing the holy routine of the church year and participating in word and sacrament are primary ways that Anglicans “continue in the apostles’ teaching.” Yet just as worship is not the whole of the church’s life, regular Sunday attendance is not the whole of religious formation. Sunday school is not, nor was it ever, only for children or only held on Sunday. Verna Dozier, one of the most provocative instigators of baptismal ministry, asserts that “religious authority comes with baptism.”¹⁵ If the baptized, including laity as well as clergy, are to claim their authority in church and in society, continuing study of Scripture and tradition as well as attentive knowledge of contemporary life is required. Baptism signals that God has important work to do. In the baptismal covenant we commit ourselves to replenishing resources for this journey through worship, prayer, and study.

The strong language of the second promise is arresting: “Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?” These words directly acknowledge the reality of systemic evil and individual sinfulness. This pledge reiterates the three renunciations of evil made at the time of baptism: “Satan and all the

¹³ Sara Maitland, *A Big-Enough God: A Feminist’s Search for a Joyful Theology* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 167.

¹⁴ For this and all quotations from the baptismal covenant that follow, see the Book of Common Prayer (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 304-305.

¹⁵ *The Calling of the Laity: Verna Dozier’s Anthology* (Washington, D.C.: The Alban Institute, 1988), 115.

spiritual forces of evil,” “the evil powers of this world,” and “all sinful desires.”¹⁶ In the baptismal covenant all present recommit themselves to resist external forces of evil as well as to repent personal sins. The baptized, in the early church and in today’s perilous times, live in a world marred by violence and suffering. The baptismal covenant actively addresses this condition with hopeful language of forgiveness and resistance. It recognizes starkly that there is no social transformation without personal transformation. Repentance is multidimensional and ongoing. Active, not passive, response is called forth as is perseverance over the long haul.

This lesson applies to biblical times as well as to our own. Prophets and other theologians have long recognized the need for reshaping hope in new situations. This is clear in Jeremiah’s response to the exiles: “I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (29:11).¹⁷ Augustine may have had resistance in mind when he noted that “hope has two lively daughters—courage and anger.”¹⁸ In our own day Martin Luther King, Jr. often quoted words attributed to Edmund Burke, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”¹⁹ Vincent Harding, an African American historian and activist who has told the story of the North American freedom movement, hails the “human potential for resistance and hope.”²⁰ Similarly, one of my faculty colleagues, Edward Rodman, contends that hope lies in the opportunity to resist. All of this and more is summed up by the injunction to “persevere in resisting evil,” and in the call to repent and return to the Lord. This baptismal promise puts the decision to respond to evil and sin in our hands. This is strong religious medicine, just the sort of prescriptive affirmation needed to undergird hope among God’s people in times of suffering, violence, and genocide.

Another call extended to the baptized in the baptismal covenant is biblical proclamation. “Will you proclaim by word and example the

¹⁶ These three contemporary renunciations from the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, 302, replace and strengthen earlier Prayer Book references presented in a single renunciation.

¹⁷ See also Brueggemann, *Hope within History*, 3 and 68.

¹⁸ Maitland, *A Big-Enough God*, 167.

¹⁹ Cited in Vincent Harding, *Hope and History: Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 212.

²⁰ Quoted in *Yes!* 24 (Winter 2003); see also his “Letter to Teachers in Religious Communities and Institutions,” *Hope and History*, 201-228.

Good News of God in Christ?” Scripture for Christians is our primary language, our native tongue. Directly encountering the sacred in Scripture was at the core of the religious revolution we call the “Reformation.” Our Protestant ancestors did not take access to their Bible book for granted; indeed, they renewed worship to embrace its wisdom. Thomas Cranmer’s sixteenth-century Prayer Book collect summoned his contemporaries to “hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest” the Bible’s teaching. The contemporary version of this collect omits Cranmer’s description that Scripture works “by patience and comfort of thy holy Word.” Perhaps many today think the Bible should provide quicker answers. Proclamation for early Anglicans involved “patience,” sounding a note similar to the call to persevere. It also worked as a “comfort.”²¹ Although in modern English this word is tamed into soothing images, in the sixteenth century its original meaning implied acting “with strength.” The original intent of evangelization, indeed of Jesus’ teaching, involved strengthening those who were with him—those called to follow him—in addition to sending out disciples to teach amid new cultures, lands, and peoples. For the baptized the hope of transformation, the strengthening voice of mutual comfort, begins at home. Proclamation, as we “inwardly digest” its strength, extends outward in word and deed. Liturgist Louis Weil reminds us that a baptismal understanding of the church is “rooted in the real world.”²² Pulpits are important yet secondary way stations of evangelization; the place of proclamation for the baptized is located in everyday settings.

Scripture also tutors the baptized in exemplary living. The fourth question in the baptismal covenant, “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” is a decidedly scriptural call to service. The baptized are sent into the world to serve in God’s name. Again this baptismal promise is not designed to be tamed or confined to Sundays. The request here is not for volunteers. It is, as God’s adopted own, to follow Jesus. Baptismal living does not simply mean “being good volunteers.”²³ Verna Dozier bluntly asks, “Do you want to follow Jesus? Or are you content just to worship him?”²⁴ The call to discipleship, to service in the world, is not a pri-

²¹ See the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, 184 and 236.

²² Weil, *A Theology of Worship*, 18.

²³ I owe this observation to my faculty colleague and Massachusetts state representative, Byron Rushing.

²⁴ Verna J. Dozier, *The Dream of God: A Call to Return* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1991), 142.

vate call, nor is it for the faint of heart. It is for the baptized, the collective, steadfast body of Christ sent forth in the power of the Spirit to perform the service set before them. Such service rests on the biblical, hope-filled promise of abundant gifts for ministry, like the many charisms named in the Pauline epistles.

The call of the baptized to committed service is demanding. Loving our neighbors may well prove costly. As Desmond Tutu repeatedly reminds audiences today, the people of God are meant to be Godlike, which we show in particular by loving our enemies. Dietrich Bonhoeffer summed up the role of the baptized in his book *The Cost of Discipleship* as a stance that embraces suffering as a universal part of the human condition in which God is also present. In Hitler's prisons, those who sought and received Bonhoeffer's spiritual guidance were not only fellow inmates but prison guards. Hope comes with the recognition that suffering is part of the human condition and God embraces suffering fully. As in Scripture, hope emerges from the perspective of neighborly love amid the powerless and marginalized. Seeking and serving "Christ in all persons" is an all-encompassing promise.

This call to service prepares us for a fifth promise, one that builds upon each of the preceding promises affirmed in the baptismal covenant and that lifts up biblical visions of hope. The commitment to "strive for justice and peace among all people, and [to] respect the dignity of every human being" is summative of the high calling of the baptized community. One of the earliest baptismal formulas signified God's promise of freedom and unity in Christ. Paul envisioned baptism as overcoming all that separates human beings from one another and God: "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is now no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:27-29). An implicit message is that cultural diversity discloses God's creativity. Paul's promise of baptismal unity in Galatians is expansive as well as inclusive. Nineteenth-century theologian F. D. Maurice taught that God's redemptive love was intended for all, including those of other religions. The explicit intention of the fifth baptismal promise respects the dignity of each person and culture, and commits followers of Christ to justice and peace throughout the world. It is a boundless promise.

Today, as in biblical times, religious divisions ostensibly militate against peace and justice among people of different cultures and faiths. Dare we live with hope in today's world? How might a vow to seek "justice and peace among all people," become part of daily living? One

story about seeking God's *shalom* comes via a colleague recently returned from a church-sponsored peace mission among Palestinians. He reported stories of those who insisted that hope was a luxury they could no longer afford. A banner displayed at a massive demonstration for peace poignantly noted: "Due to present circumstances the light at the end of the tunnel has been put out." What happens if hope seems lost? What then is the responsibility of the baptized? The promises of the baptismal covenant do not stand alone. They are supported and upheld in common prayer. "Let not . . . the hope of the poor be taken away" is a daily petition in Morning and Evening Prayer. The Psalter offers comfort, as in the opening verse of Psalm 46, "God is our hope and strength, a very present help in trouble."²⁵

Each of the promises in the baptismal covenant is saturated with responsive hope in God. This is repeatedly signaled by the reply offered after each of the five promises: "I will, with God's help." Hope, as presented in this essay, is not a possession or an object. Hope precipitates a living process, a "bold conviction of an alternative possibility," a promise that the present is provisional and open to change.²⁶ This is our inheritance, a salvific birthright that we thankfully acknowledge in the postcommunion prayer when we describe ourselves as "heirs, *through hope*, of thy everlasting kingdom."²⁷ Christians continue to be, as noted in early baptismal testimony from the first letter of Peter, birthed "into a living hope." Daily we are supported in baptismal living not simply by our good intentions but by a God who stands by her adopted children in countless ways. This covenant, like all biblical covenants, evokes a living partnership, an enduring covenant of hope.

²⁵ This reading is from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer; interestingly, the 1979 Prayer Book substitutes "refuge" for "hope."

²⁶ Brueggemann, *Hope within History*, 69 and 80.

²⁷ The 1979 Book of Common Prayer, 339, emphasis added.



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